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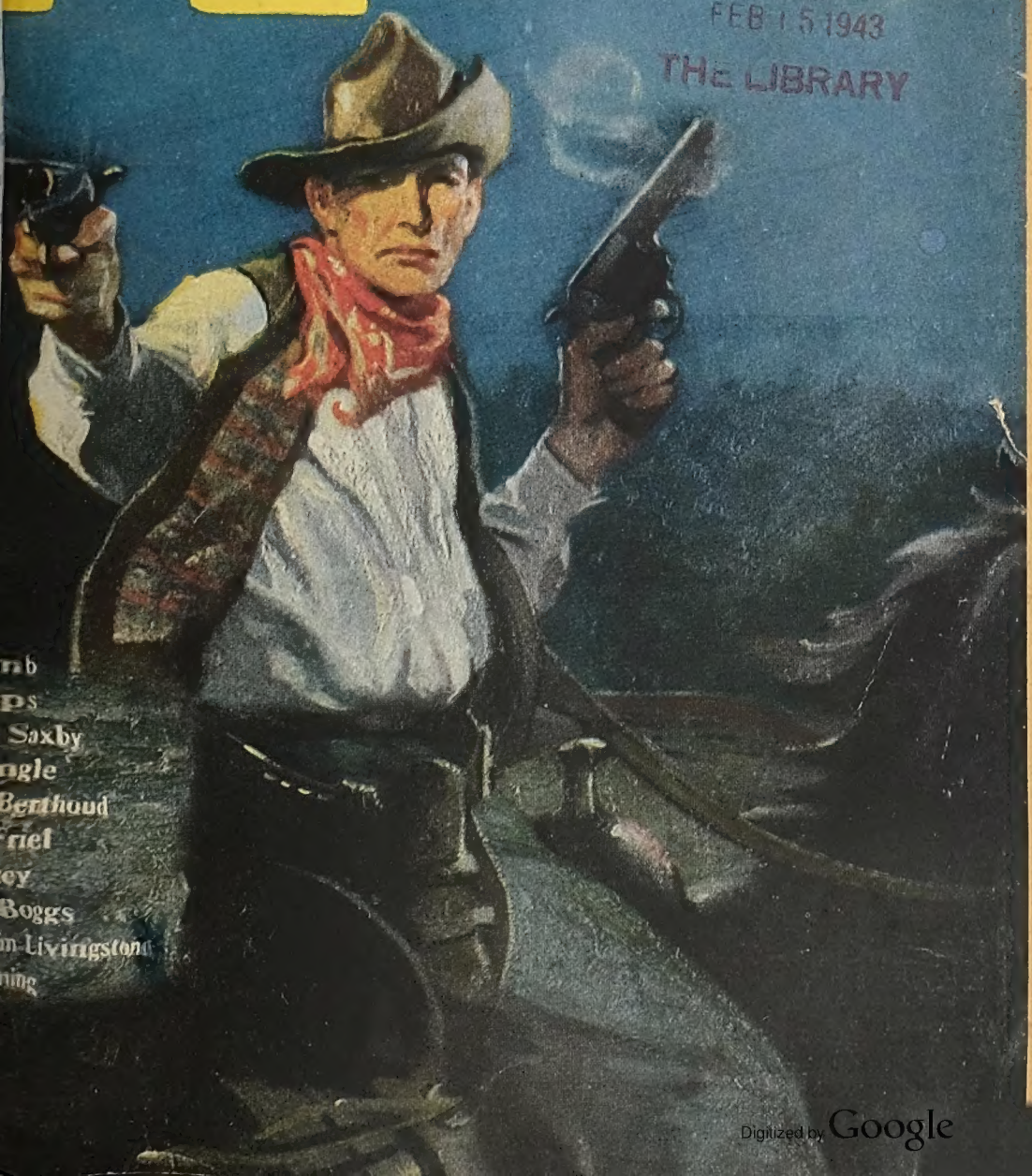

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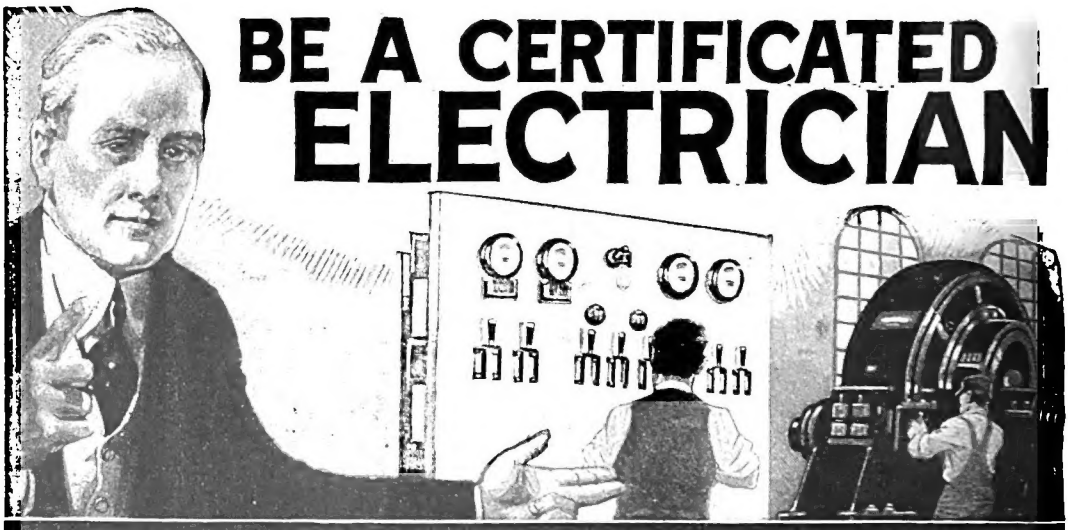

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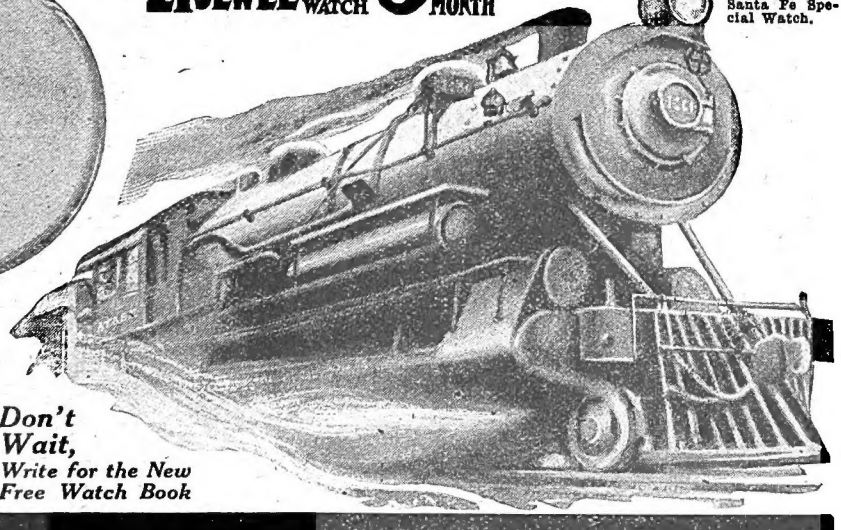

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Volume 27
Number 3

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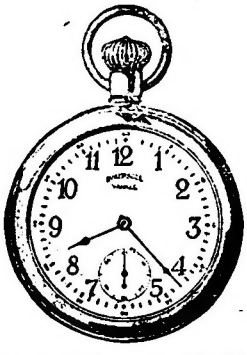

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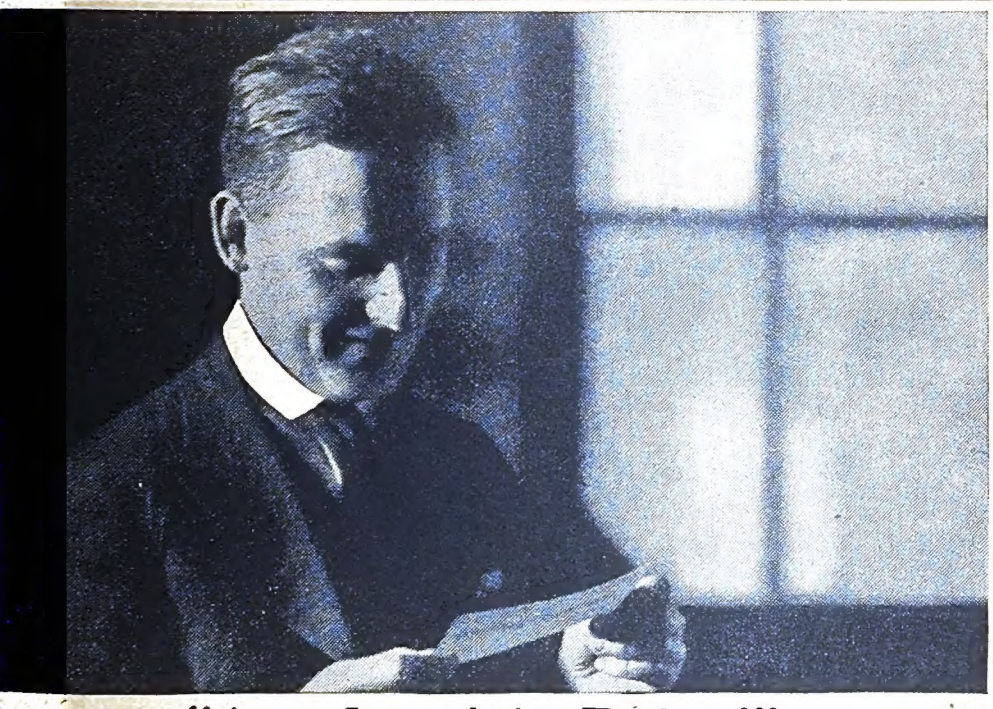

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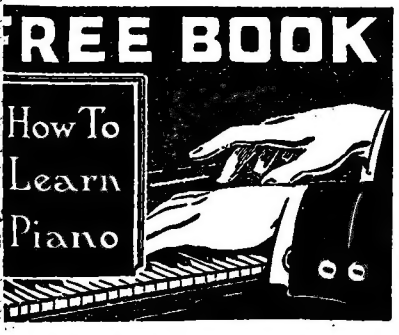

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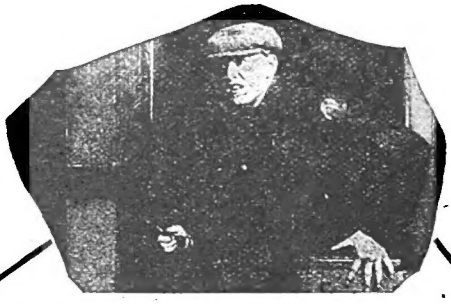

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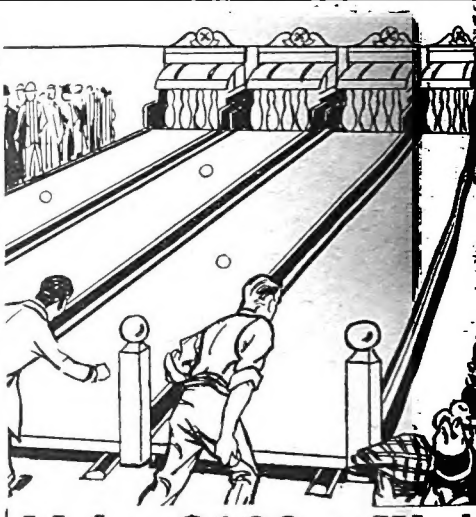

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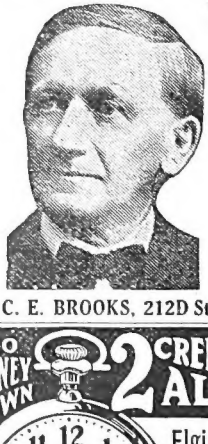

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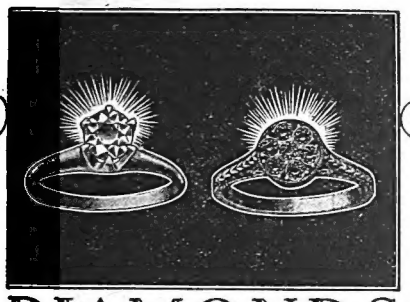

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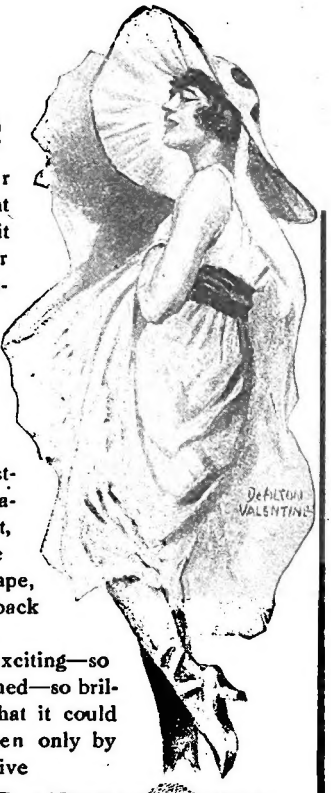

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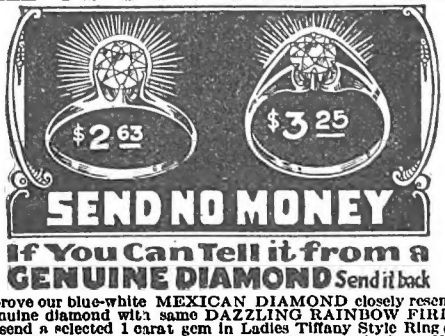

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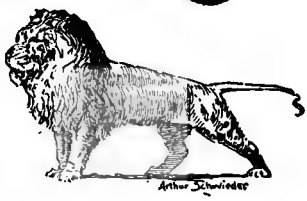

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**Occasionally one of our stories will be called an "Off the-Trail" story, a warning that it is in some way different from the usual magazine stories, perhaps a little different, perhaps a good deal. It may violate a canon of literature or a custom of magazines, or merely be different from the type usually found in this magazine. The difference may lie in unusual theme, material, ending, or manner of telling. No question of relative merit is involved.*

IN CHINA, the land of intrigue, *Koshinga*, mad with the lust for world-dominion, plots rebellion and sways the masses with his mystic power. "THE DRAGON SPEAKS," a complete novelette by Robert J. Pearsall, in our next issue.

WHEN Virginia was a colony the Indians gathered in force and swept through the valleys laying waste the settlements. Then the white men gathered and one of the bloodiest of the Indian wars was fought. "A SCOUT FOR VIRGINIA," a four-part novel by Hugh Pendexter, begins in our next issue.

Other stories in the next issue are mentioned on the last page of this one.

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Adventure
November 3, 1920
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THE CURVED SWORD, A Complete Novel

by Harold Lamb

Author of "The Lion Cub," "The Law of Fire," etc.

CHAPTER I

In the mountains the light of the sun is strongest; there the shadows are deepest. The herds find there the richest grass, and the water that rushes from the snows overhead.

In the mountains the herder sleeps under the open eyes of God. And he hears the voice of the winds, betokening sunrise and storm.

In the mountains the eagle beholds the world beneath his wings.

Is an eagle to be found in the lowlands? Nay—naught is there but the sparrow-hawk and kite.—*Afghan proverb.*

CHAN, the minstrel, rose and girded tight his shawl belt. It was the hour of sunset and the *namaz gar*—the evening prayer. From the village below his tent Chan could hear the mullah's cry; but although scarcely a village in the southern foothills of the Himalayas did not join in the prayer to the Prophet in the year 1609, Chan heeded neither mullah's cry nor his own spiritual welfare.

Sunset to Chan the minstrel meant sometimes supper of mutton or rice and sometimes a yearning stomach. This evening, however, he had left the stock of rice and dried apricots in his felt tent untasted. He had been engaged in the more important work of composing a love lyric.

The song was finished—and the Afghan youth boasted a critical ear, schooled in the musical modes of the wandering bards of Samarkand, likewise a skilled finger to stir the one string of his guitar—and Chan sprang into the saddle of his pony, which had been grazing behind the tent. He adjusted the shagreen quiver of arrows behind his left shoulder, slinging his guitar over his right arm.

Chan was a dark-faced, merry-eyed youth—although a wisdom beyond his years, born of many privations and no little fighting, lurked behind the smile in those same brown eyes. The *zirih*—sleeveless coat of mail—gripped his lithe body tightly under the ragged and travel-stained red-velvet cloak. Blue turquoise glimmered on the dagger-hilt that peered from his girdle, and a brown cap of sable fur topped his black locks.

His pony began to trot mechanically down

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toward the village as the minstrel hummed the refrain of his new lyric triumphantly. An unstrung bow bobbed at his saddle-peak. Chan, who was as skilled at making play with bow-string as guitar-string, had long ago passed the test of Afghan archery—to shoot, at full gallop, an arrow at a mark, loosen the bow and use it as a whip, then restring to let fly another arrow at the same mark.

"My bow for an enemy, my song for my mistress," he hummed, "and both, my faith, reach to the heart—aye, both to the heart."

Thus sang Chan as he trotted onward, fully prepared to take either weapon in hand—so uncertain were these times in the hills of Hindustan.

"Nay," he murmured to the ears of his pony that twitched back responsively; "shall we sew the pearls of wit upon the cord of love or ply the arrow-stitches of vengeance! *Hai—ohai*, the day is fair and soon we shall see the gray stone walls that enclose the fairest jewel of paradise!"

Meditating in this manner, he passed through the village—not without a tentative sniff at the odors that rose with the smoke of the cooking-fires before the huts. He called cheerily at the flocks of black-faced sheep that pressed home from the pasture trails. Snatching at a cluster of dying, yellow roses, he arrayed the blossoms bravely in his cap.

The pony, knowing well the way, passed rapidly under twisted junipers, over grassy downs and by glens already shadowy with evening. A wind, stirring in lazy gusts from the mountain passes overhead, tossed the dried balls of gray thistles before the rider, who struck at them readily with his bow.

Chan's hut had been on the mountain slope just within the upper timber line where he could watch what was going on in the valleys, fully prepared to flee to the rocky passes if need be. Overhead, the giant shoulders of the Koh-i-Baba thrust up from the pine forest; still farther rose the barren wastes of the heights to the snow-peaks, encrimsoned by the setting sun.

He was now riding through the fertile uplands of the province known to his race as Badakshan, which was on the marches of the empire of Hindustan, the border above Kabul Valley and the passes through the Hindu Kush—the Shyr and Khyber Passes, already scenes of age-old battles—and a thorn in the side of the Emperor of Hindustan, *Padishah* Jahangir, the Mogul, Lord of the World and Master of Ind.

Without guidance the pony turned aside from the valley trail through the dried broom that led to a gorge under one of the cliffs. Here an apple orchard almost concealed a tiny sandstone house. Chan tethered his mount to one of the trees and advanced, peering about him in the uncertain light.

Overhead the sky was still blue and the sun was blood-colored behind the summits; but in the gorge darkness fell swiftly, and already a star or two was winking into being in the east. A dog slunk off at his approach. Chan glanced at it in some surprize, humming still as he took his guitar in hand.

Under a rose-bush near the house wall he sat crosslegged, and smiled. Within the stone wall, he thought, a lovely girl would be expecting his song. Chan, of course, had never seen her face, but he had talked with her and knew that she must be lovely.

Then his figure stiffened and he looked attentively at the ground.

Many horses had passed here since his last visit. The bushes were broken through in places and the earth trampled. The minstrel ran an exploring finger over one of the imprints and drew in his breath sharply, feeling the mark of leather shoes.

For a space the man was silent, his senses keenly alert. The quietude of the stone house weighed upon him, and he remembered the furtive manner of the dog. He even fancied that he heard a moan issue from within.

Abruptly the howl of the dog disturbed him. Chan sprang up and ran into the door, stooping under the low portal. At his feet he could make out a human body that moved and sighed. A glance around the bare stone chamber, and a second, more hesitant, into the screened woman's quarters, showed him that no one else was to be seen.

He bent over the form at his feet and saw that it was the mother of the house.

"*Aie!*" she cried, seeing Chan. "*Aie!*"

"What has come to pass? Whither your daughter——"

The mother rose to her knees, tresses disheveled about her shoulders and her hands bloodied. She who had often driven him from the orchard with abuse grasped his knees, leaving thereon the stains of torn fingers.

"Evil has come upon this house. Riders passed along the road, and one saw the child of my heart and liver watching from under the trees. They took her, and beat me when I cried out—taking the rings from my fingers ——"

The woman held up her hands and Chan saw that two fingers had been cut off. He freed himself from her grasp, drawing a long breath, and stepped toward the door.

"Who were the riders, and whither did they turn their horses' heads?"

For a space the mother was silent, looking fearfully out of the door. Then a fresh outburst of grief overcame her.

"Alacha, the Slayer, it was, with his men. May Ali the Just pursue him with retribution! May he taste the evil he has stored up for others! *Barkallah!* O Chan, brave Chan, men

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say you are quick and shrewd. Mount, good Chan, speed your shaft——"

Mechanically the young minstrel slung the guitar over his back and strung his bow.

"Went they south or north?"

"South, toward the camp of that black Turkoman, Alacha." Her weak voice rose in sudden terror. "Strike not at Alacha, foolish one! Anger not those who hold the valley within their grasp. Nay—send the shaft into the breast of my pearl of beauty, my innocent daughter——"

But the minstrel strode from door and house, mounting with a single leap. Behind him the peasant woman rocked in her misery, heedless of her own hurt. Chan wore no spurs, yet the pony wheeled away at full gallop at the urge of its rider.

Alacha, sometimes called the *Kara* or Black Turkoman, was the landholder of the valley of Badakshan—that wide, fertile valley which was more like a plain, high in the foothills of the Himalayas, wherein were the villages of the Afghans and the Mongol Hazaras and great Balkh, the mother of cities. Alacha was *jagirdar* or fief-holder of the Mogul, and his authority over the land was absolute so long as the yearly tax of grain, animals, cloths and silver was paid by him to the Mogul and judicious presents were sent to the court at the festivals.

Surrounded by his Turkoman, Persian and Uzbek followers, living in his stately, moving camp, the Slayer had well earned the name bestowed on him by the Afghan tribes of the countryside. Perhaps for this reason he had been selected by Jahangir, the Mogul, as a fitting ruler of Badakshan, which was far from peaceful. Once the warriors of Badakshan had aided the Mogul during the stress of battle; but the memory of an emperor is short, and independence is the breath of life to an Afghan.

To resist the authority of Alacha was to strike against the might of the Mogul. To lift weapon against the rulers of the valley was to risk the terrors of fire and pillage. So the mother in her grief had known, and so Chan knew. But the minstrel was great of soul.

Riding swiftly beyond the confines of the village, he passed the last of the tilled land and so came at full gallop to a rise in the trail where, silhouetted against the after-glow of the sky, two riders sat their horses.

They were tall men, fully armed. One by the drape of his turban and his long cloak appeared an Afghan. But Chan made out at his shoulder a small, round shield of a kind worn by followers of the Mogul. The other rider, bearded and wide of shoulder, wore a peculiar sheepskin hat tilted on one side of his shaggy head.

Both sat their horses easily, watching him. Both were powerful men, travel-stained. Neither spoke as he neared them, but he of the turban dressed his shield swiftly, seeing Chan pluck forth an arrow from over his shoulder.

Never doubting that the two were an afterguard of the armed party that had carried off the girl, Chan loosed the arrow. It rang against metal on the chest of the turbaned rider. The next moment Chan was on his foe, discarding his bow for the long Persian dagger in his girdle.

The minstrel struck swiftly, wheeling his pony as the rider maneuvered his own mount readily. Steel clashed against steel as Chan sought to close with his adversary, who faced him silently without giving ground. Momentarily Chan thought to feel the weapon of the other warrior strike his unprotected back. But the tall wearer of the sheepskin hat watched passively, even laughing once deep in his throat.

"Ho, stealer of women!" grunted the minstrel hotly, for it was his fashion to speak aloud while fighting and ever to voice the thought that was in his mind. "Despoiler of a home! Tearer of the veil of a maiden's chastity! Dog——"

Thus addressed, he of the turban caught Chan's wrist with his free hand and with a grip of remorseless fingers loosened the minstrel's hold on the dagger until the weapon clanged to earth.

Unarmed, Chan fronted his foe resolutely, stunned by the swift skill that had overcome him as if he were a child in arms.

"Aye, dog," he muttered, "for you bear the insignia of shame, being yet an Afghan—" he pointed at the round shield— "for, like a dog, you stray about seeking the scraps that fall from the Mogul's table and lick the hand that crushes the life from your race!"

Instead of striking the youth, the warrior of the turban drew a long, hissing breath and peered intently at Chan's face as if to mark his adversary. His own features were veiled by a loosened fold of the turban. And, bending head upon chest, he seemed to draw back into the screening shadows of evening. It was the silent watcher who spoke.

"STRIPLING, do your arrows burn in their quiver that you loose them thus? We are no takers of women. Some riders passed, at speed, two bowshots before you, and in the dust of their going I saw a woman across the saddle-peak of one. Likewise another woman ran after them screaming. If you seek them, go—but look before you loose a second shaft."

Chan peered from one to the other, bewildered.

"Be you not men of the Mogul?"

"Aye, and—nay. Go!"

Glancing at the fierce eyes that bored into his from under shaggy brows, Chan stooped to

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snatch up his dagger without quitting saddle. He gathered up his reins, muttering to himself, "This is no man of human mold—" measuring the long waist, high shoulders and massive thews of the taller warrior—"and verily his mate is a swordsman of the brood of hell——"

"Of the Mogul's bodyguard," grunted he of the sheepskin hat. "O One of Small Wit, you have crossed steel with him who is master of the simitar in all Hindustan. There is another riddle for your addle-pate. Now, go!"

And Chan galloped away, not before his late adversary had checked him long enough to learn his name.

He urged his horse along the grassy trail, peering into the gathering shadows as he went. It was not long before he reined in suddenly, throwing his pony back on its haunches.

Leaping from the saddle, Chan ran to a white huddle that lay across the road. It was the form of a young woman, unveiled. Where throat met breast the hilt of a dagger projected, and under the still head and scattered tresses the earth was damp.

Chan shaded his eyes to search the trail ahead, but saw only a haze of dust at a distant turn.

"Alacha has passed," he sighed.

Barely could he make out the face of the dead woman—rounded, innocent features, stained with dust, dark eyes that strained wildly up at the empty vault of the skies, a full, young mouth twisted with strange, sudden pain.

He touched the dagger-hilt gently without moving it and found it to be heavily jeweled, of Persian workmanship. Once or twice the minstrel had seen the weapon in the girdle of the Slayer.

"Aye," he sighed again, "my precious flower of beauty was fair, even as I foreknew. Her cheeks are like the rounded rose-petals, her throat is fair as the soft throat of a pigeon.

"*Alie*—my fair one, my pearl of love, my bird that fell from the nest! Allah in His wisdom has taken you to His mercy—so Muhammad Asad, the holy man would tell me. I mocked at him, yet can I doubt the meaning of death?"

As if the story were written in the dust of the road, its message was clear for Chan to read. Held upon the saddle-peak of Alacha, the girl had managed to draw his dagger from his girdle unseen in the dim light and had struck, not at her foe but at herself, choosing the surest release from her bondage.

It was like Alacha, the minstrel pondered bitterly, to toss the body aside into the road when he saw that the woman would die. By tomorrow he would have forgotten the incident. Alacha, by nature and political position, was scarcely afraid of consequences.

So Chan, grieving at the death of the woman he had wooed without seeing her face, took up the body in his arms. With some difficulty he mounted, bearing his burden, and set off back along the way he had come, toward the village.

Far overhead on his right the snow-peaks were turning from dark crimson to purple. Darkness was in the valley, and a cold wind stirred the dust under the pony's hoofs, wafting a strong, chill scent of willows and aspen from the near-by thickets.

Man and horse moved slowly as if tired. Chan's thoughts were numbed.

"The mountains are red," he said to himself, "and red is the road. It is the color of blood."

The muscles of his face moved spasmodically and stiffened. His teeth drew back from set lips.

"In the law of the Prophet is it written; there is the price of blood to be paid. Aye—to be paid."

CHAPTER II

THE SIGN AT THE CROSSROADS

THE light had not failed when the two riders who had recently encountered Chan passed by the village without attracting attention and followed the path as it wound upward along the edge of the forest.

They rode in silence, yet keeping abreast and looking occasionally at each other or at the trail ahead or behind in the fashion of men who have been much together and are accustomed to notice their surroundings with a wariness that is the mark of troubled times.

Here the forest gave back and numerous fields of lush grass appeared cut by ravines down which unseen streams murmured over worn stones. An owl hooted somewhere in the direction of a bare pine that towered against the darkening sky. And ahead of them a flight of wide-winged birds rose lazily. At the same time a stringent odor came to them on the wind.

The Afghan motioned his companion to halt and pointed out another path running athwart their own. Midway where the two met, a stout stake projected from the ground. A last, lingering vulture flapped away from the stake, rising from the body of a man transfixed by the wooden point.

"This is my homeland," observed he of the turban slowly, "and I have not slept within its borders since some months before I joined company with you. Behold the sign for the traveler."

He laughed once shortly, and passed on, his horse shying at the dead body.

"Even so," remarked the elder rider calmly, "we must sleep and our horses have come far this day from the pass you call the Khyber."

The Afghan glanced back at the stake and the form over which the carrion birds were

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assembling, now that the two riders had passed the crossroads.

"Not here, old warrior. Near by in a ravine should be a holy man, Muhammad Asad, whom I seek. Come!"

Up one of the watercourses which descended from the slopes of the overhanging hills there was a granite cliff bearing certain writings in the Turki tongue, chiseled into the face of the rock. These writings, maxims of the Koran, were laboriously traced by the hermit mullah, Muhammad Asad, whose blindness precluded his writing upon parchment.

Unlike the Hindu *fakirs*, Muhammad Asad lived not upon mendicant charity, but was supplied with food by the villagers. A thin native boy who had kindled a fire in the mouth of the cliff's base—the abode of the mullah—stared at the two newcomers who walked their horses into the circle of light.

The hermit, a lean man with white beard and skin darkened almost to black by the sun, stood up in his neat cloak and spotless turban and greeted the two, seemingly without surprize.

"It is written," he cried in a melodious voice, "that guests are a blessing from Allah. Doubly fortunate am I, in this ill-omened year, that I should share my evening meal. Dismount!"

"A true Afghan greeting," observed the turbaned warrior to his companion, turning his horse loose to graze.

At this the blind mullah lifted his head sharply, as one who hears a familiar note of music.

"A true believer speaks," he murmured. "Aye, in the hills of Badakshan it is the law that even an enemy may sleep unafraid beneath the roof of an Afghan. Are you friend or enemy!"

His sightless eyes peered in the direction of the two visitors as if seeking out the secrets that were hidden from him. The Afghan strode to the fire.

"A friend, Muhammad Asad," he responded almost roughly. "Aye, one who rides pursued by sorrow. My companion is a warrior known to many lands and courts, although a *caphar* (unbeliever.) Come, give him food."

Muhammad Asad still stood as if listening for something he did not hear.

"It is written," he said again gently, "that he who is pursued by sorrow knows not what the road may bring to him."

He motioned his guests to the fire, but refused to share their repast, saying that hunger lacked. Then he dismissed the boy and bade them spread blankets by the fire within the shallow cave, which was little except a depression in the face of the cliff.

"Enough to an Afghan," he observed quietly, "his rug and blanket. Let the hired mercenaries of the World-Gripper (Jahangir, the Mogul) have their silks and cushions."

The Afghan warrior looked up sharply, his glance straying to the round shield that rested against his quiver, within arm's reach. In the firelight his hawk-like features stood out clearly, the skin tight upon the bone, his keen eyes quick and clear, his thin-lipped mouth straight as a knife cut in the dark face.

A man in the prime of life, his bearing and actions suggested a soldier, and a scar running from cheek to eye indicated a severe wound sustained years ago. He ate little, and watched the mullah thoughtfully.

His big-boned, bearded companion, however, made away with enough for two men and looked regretfully at the last remains of the *pilau*—a dish of rice and mutton, highly seasoned. Then he lay back upon his sheepskin coat, paying little attention to the talk of the other two, for he knew only a smattering of Turki.

"Warrior," observed the mullah, folding thin arms in his wide sleeves. "You have come far this day. Aye, from the Khyber neck where the guards of Alacha watch the land. You are a soldier of the Mogul, and you have come hither to hear what Muhammad Asad can tell you about the valley."

The Afghan started and glared at the priest.

"This is sorcery!" he grunted. "You are blind——"

"Sight, Moslem," smiled Muhammand Asad, "lies inward as well as outward. A lame sense is aided by the crutch of wisdom. Nay—you walk and sit like one who is sore and wearied, as I can hear. Were you not a follower of the World-Gripper—may Allah heap upon him the fruits of his tyranny—Alacha's guards would not lightly let you pass. And since my poor home is hidden from the highroad, you have sought me out."

The other fingered his sword irresolutely.

"On the farther side of the village, O *kwajah* (man of wisdom) we beheld a youth who calls himself Chan, and he rode in pursuit of men who had taken a woman from the village. Know you aught of this?"

"A woman!" Muhammad Asad's thin face darkened. "That is an evil thing. So Alacha has dared openly to pierce the veil of the harem?

"Yet it is like to other deeds of the Slayer. He struck down with his sword the child who brought out to him the keys of Balkh—because it was thought he would not strike a child—and laughed, saying that the bandits of the Hindu Kush should taste the power of their emperor."

He paused, shaking his head.

"My years are many, O honored guest—" the blind man dwelled forcibly on the last two words—"and much have I heard of the warfare of the tribes, sometimes between themselves—for that has been the fate of the Afghan—and more often to defend them from the Uzbek of the west or the Persian of the

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south. But never before have I heard the name of emperor cried out in the valley of the Hindu Kush that is Badakshan. So I have proclaimed from the minaret of Balkh that this is a year of danger and peril, wherein the evil omens cluster about Badakshan as the vultures sink to the body of the slain messenger on the highroad. For that Alacha had the soles of my feet beaten with wands, and I gave thanks to Allah, for I suffered in a just cause."

"I have been in Hindustan," said the soldier, "and there also have wars been. I have not heard of these things."

"Doubtless the Emperor of Hindustan has paid you in good gold," responded the priest. "Watching from our hills, we have seen the armies of the Mogul overrun the province of Kabul, and once our fighting men under our leader Abdul Dost saved the World-Gripper his life. Has Jahangir forgotten that."

"The court is far from Badakshan, and the revenues from the hills have been scanty, O *kwajah*. Money is the thews by which the Mogul holds his empire together."

"Yet Jahangir sent Alacha. Once we dispatched a messenger to complain to the Mogul. When the Slayer learned of this the messenger did not return to us, nor did his word reach farther than one of the lesser ameers."

And Muhammad Asad, kneeling by the embers of the fire, told of villages stripped of their stores of grain so that hunger walked ominously through the valley, of droves of horses requisitioned for the imperial army, of *bakhshis* (treasurers) who made a list of the goods of each man and took one-third for Alacha.

He described hunts, ordered for the pleasure of Alacha, in which farmers' crops were trampled by the riders, and of cattle driven off in nightly raids which the *jagirdar* countenanced.

"It is our fate that this should be laid upon us. What could we do? The imperial standard is set before the tent of Alacha. Through him the Mogul speaks. There is no one to call him to account. Once when our councilors of Balkh were trying to keep the young men and the wandering Hazaras from revolt, I sent a second messenger, this time to our former leader in arms, Abdul Dost. But Alacha is shrewd and—the messenger lies on the highroad near my abode."

THE Afghan stared into the fire, plucking at his beard.

"Yet, O *kwajah*, you should be a man of peace and—I and our older men fought for Akbar, the father of Jahangir. It was he gave me rank of *mansabdar* on the battlefield——"

"And now the pay for which you have sold your sword is gleaned from the empty bellies of our tribe. The Mogul is no longer a hill man, and he has forgotten that his grandsire was of Mongol blood. He has turned Hindu, and it is said he eats the drugs of the Persians. The shadow of his hand lies over the land."

"Only in a united India, O *kwajah*, is there hope of peace. The Mogul's hand binds together the empire."

"Evil, Moslem, is to be spurned. And Alacha is evil. Doubtless you fear him——"

"*Bismillah!* I, who have turned my horse from no man, fear the Black Turkoman?"

The mullah smiled a little.

"There speaks Abdul Dost."

He nodded as if in confirmation of what he had previously suspected.

"Once, Abdul Dost, I heard your voice on the highroad, in the year of the Ox. And I do not easily forget."

At this the Afghan soldier who had taken service with the Mogul fell to stroking his short, black beard as was his habit when disturbed. Since the death of his master, the last Afghan ruler of Badakshan, Abdul Dost had followed the path of war behind the standard of the Mogul, though more often engaged in independent forays with his old companion who now slept profoundly by the fireside, secure in the presence of friends.

Mingled emotions showed in the dark face of the Moslem warrior. He had heard something—for little news drifted south through the mountains save what Alacha chose to send—of the tyranny that had oppressed his people. Yet he had honored the service of Akbar, the Great, father of Jahangir, from childhood, and like the best type of Mohammedan soldier he was faithful to his leader.

Muhammad Asad with uncanny perspicacity seemed to follow the trend of his visitor's thoughts.

"The time I heard your voice, Abdul Dost," he meditated aloud, "you helped to save a child from the path of charging buffalo. Behold, the child is grown to half-boyhood and he honors your name. He it is who tends my fire and who is now gone to the village. Have the drugs and wine and the flung gold of the Mogul changed your spirit? Are you no longer a true Afghan?"

Abdul Dost looked up with smoldering intensity but said nothing.

"Dreams, Abdul Dost," continued the blind priest, "are the visions of the soul in flight without the body. In the first of this moon I dreamed that one who was skilled in war, whose name is a talisman in Badakshan, who had the noble stamp of the ancient race of Sulieman in his features, came to the oppressed people of Badakshan and placed upon his strong shoulders the cloak of faith, and took within his hand the staff of leadership."

Again he nodded with the assurance of the aged.

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"And, behold, Abdul Dost, you came to my eside and the first portion of my dream was ie. Yet because you cherished the rank of *nsab*, in the pay of the money-gleaner hangir, I would not share bread and salt th you until I knew whether you were true ghan or—" and his mild voice strengthened righteous wrath—"a dog that feeds at the ole of the Mongol who has forgotten his th, his faith, and the two laws—the law of e Koran and the law of Genghis Khan who s the first and greatest Mongol."

The subtle oratory of the ardent-spirited llah worked profoundly on the simpler otions of the soldier. But to Abdul Dost th was self-evident: his mind was shaped action, yet before acting it was not his ure to ponder at length.

'Bismillah!"

He flung out an eloquent hand.

'O *kwajah*, hither I came to drink at the reshing well of your wisdom. What avails o reproach me for that I have been a warrior the Mogul. It is no shame. Were more our heedless and quarrelsome men obedient authority, the balm of peace would heal sores of past wars that afflict Badakshan. a just ruler lies the solution of our unrest."

'Not so, Abdul Dost. Can a tiger be soned within bars? Is an eagle fashioned God to fly with clipped wings? Jahangir proclaimed himself lord of Badakshan. It he heritage of the Afghans to have no rulers cept themselves!"

His low voice rang with conviction. Abdul st stretched an appealing hand toward the llah as if beseeching relief from his own uble.

'Then would you have Badakshan rebel inst the Mogul?"

WAS HE said this, footsteps sounded outside the cave. The *mansabdar* moved on his knees and his hand went his sword-hilt, but the *kwajah* smiled, say-

'It is the boy."

The stripling, panting from a hard run, named respectfully to Abdul Dost and st into pent-up speech.

He had been to the village and had come h news warm on his lips. Chan, the min-l, the master of artful song, had entered village with the body of a young woman oss his saddle. Chan had shown the knife Alacha fast in the throat of the woman. He l shown the body to the head men of the age.

The Slayer has crossed the barrier of the em," cried the boy. "So said the elders. l Chan asks that the price of blood be paid."

Muhammad Asad turned to Abdul Dost, fragile countenance dark with religious zeal.

"Allah has ordained it thus, Abdul Dost. Here is the answer to your question. A woman has been slain, and Alacha must pay the price. When a freshet from the snow-line rises and rushes downward, who can stay its course?"

The *mansabdar*, concealing his deep anxiety before the boy, stared into the fire. He knew that this murder of a woman, unlike the previous slaughter of tribesmen and peasants under the thin guise of justice, meant war in Afghan territory.

"No man can stay the working of fate," cried Muhammad Asad. "The will of God will come to pass, even thus. And I prophesy! *Ai*—the spirit that has come into my soul calls for speech."

He rose, extending emaciated arms to the roof of the cave, against which the smoke rose, blackening the rock. His sightless eyes turned skyward.

"*Ai*—hear these, my words. I, Muhammad Asad, humblest of the servants of God, foretell what will come to pass. In my soul it is clear. I know—I have long known. Blood will cover the mountains; bones will whiten in the valleys. The hand of Death will strike upon Badakshan!"

Abdul Dost and the boy watched the aged man with mingled feelings in which awe predominated. Often had the blind mullah foretold events of importance, perhaps purely from keen judgment arising from his close knowledge of affairs in the hills, perhaps from premonition sharpened by deep meditation, the fruit of long fasting and inward thought.

"There will be a battle in the valley," he cried. "The cannon and the elephants of the World-Gripper array themselves against the horsemen of the hills—and others.

"I see clouds of riders coming, dense as flight of arrows from the passes where no riders are. I see bright swords drawn from scabbards that are now rusted. I see these horsemen, who once rode through Afghanistan, Kwaresan, Iran and Khorassan, but are not now in the land——"

He resumed his seat on the ground by Abdul Dost, his eyes closed. For a space there was silence, save for the deep breathing of the boy.

"What riders mean you?" asked Abdul Dost at length, for the words had puzzled him.

"How should I know, Afghan? But this thing you will see, for it is written."

His delicate, strained features became all at once very gentle.

"Aye, Abdul Dost, there will be war, and the terrors of war. But out of the fighting peace may come. Will you take up the reins of leadership?"

Hereupon the boy gazed avidly at the veteran warrior, the light of hero-worship strong in his brown eyes.

"I have a bow, O great Abdul Dost," he

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ventured, "and I can shoot crows very skilfully. Will you grant me the honor of riding behind your left side?"

The mind of the warrior was upon other things.

"Too much strife and taking of life have I seen, O *kwajah*, lightly to draw the sword of conflict. War? I know not. I must think. A leader?"

He turned at this to look at his sleeping companion, who had wakened alertly at the priest's outburst but now reposed again, his harsh face lined with fatigue.

"*Hai*—a leader, say you! Here is one who is a father of battles. At his side I have learned much of the art of war."

The boy looked his disbelief that Abdul Dost had aught to learn, and the mullah, hearing, became immersed in meditation.

"Verily is this man a master of battles," went on Abdul Dost. "He has led the *caphar* Kazaks who wield curved swords, like that at his side. And his voice has commanded the hordes of Tartary. The wiles of the Turk he knows, likewise the Rajput charge, and the battle-plan of the Mogul generals."

"Then his infidel sword is for sale?" Muhammad Asad spoke bitterly. "The Afghans lack gold, while the Mogul scatters diamonds from the back of his gold-quilted elephant——"

Abdul Dost shook his head with a laugh.

"You can not see, O *kwajah*, that this old warrior wears a torn sheepskin coat and his belt is worn leather, while his horsehide boots are stained with usage. His weapon is a curved sword, very heavy, but without jewels.

Much wealth, perhaps, has he been given, but I have seen him fling it broadcast among hungry villagers. I have seen him go hungry to pay for fodder for his horse——"

"So he will aid——"

"*Kwajah*, my companion does not seek war. He rides where he wills. I know not what is in his mind. His aid to us is worth three times a thousand fine horsemen. Yet he will not draw sword for pay or for what we Afghans cherish—renown in our history."

At this Abdul Dost lay back on his blanket, resting his head on his arm.

"This man is Khlit, who is called the Curved Saber," he said finally. "He—and I also—seek not war. Tomorrow we will ride to Alacha and hold council, seeking to adjust the wrongs of Badakshan."

Almost immediately Abdul Dost slept. The priest sat passively, drawing nearer to the embers as the heat of the fire dwindled. The boy fidgeted with tiny bow and arrows until the healthy drowsiness of childhood claimed him. The light of the fire had vanished and the cave was in darkness.

But in the village a fire had been kindled that grew and spread to other villages as Chan the minstrel rode through the valley, calling upon the tribes to see the body of the fair woman, his dead mistress, carried upon the saddle of his pony.

CHAPTER III

THE SLAYER SPEAKS

IN THE satin tent of Alacha, *jagirdar* of Badakshan, slaves set forth the morning meal. A scarlet canopy embroidered with images of birds and beasts worked in sewn pearls shaded the entrance, inside which a white cloth had been laid. Scent had been thrown into the air by the experienced servitors.

Alacha himself reclined on cushions by the cloth. A slender man with olive face and dark, neatly dressed hair, wearing the undress silk tunic and white cotton trousers of the Mogul court. His black eyes were restless and insolent. One jeweled hand cherished a falcon on an adjacent perch.

Barely did he taste the dishes of rice, minced fowl, jellies, sugar candies and rose-water. His full-lipped mouth smiled as he stroked the bird, but he was engrossed in meditation. Waving away the dishes, he clapped his hands for the guard that stood without the tent.

"The horsemen who were on post at the Shyr," he commanded briefly.

Alacha was ever sparing of words and was a master of cutting irony. It was characteristic of the *jagirdar* that unlike the ordinary ameer of the court he disliked to have courtiers and lieutenants attend him.

Attentively he surveyed the two warriors, who bowed nine times—the imperial salaam—before the tent entrance. He spoke in a very clear, high-pitched voice.

"So you passed into Badakshan him whom I ordered to be brought to me?"

"May your forgiveness anoint us, unworthy! Abdul Dost gave rank and showed signet ring of *mansabdar*. So we passed him, not knowing his name. And his companion we passed, for he is the warrior that you in your wisdom sought—Khlit, of Tatar blood."

Not a flicker of the full eyes nor a movement of the jeweled hands showed that Alacha was surprized. He studied the two men inscrutably and dismissed them with a nod. They salaamed and departed, thankful to escape punishment.

Alacha reached into a silver casket by his side and drew out a rolled paper. Attentively he scanned this, noting the seal of the imperial vizier. Then he lay back with closed eyes while a stolid slave slowly waved a plumed fan of peacock feathers back and forth over his head.

But the Slayer was not asleep. When a sentinel appeared to announce that two riders

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ought speech with him, he scarcely stirred.
"Admit them."

Only once as Abdul Dost and Khlit rode heir horses into the enclosure before the satin nt did the *jagirdar* glance at them, marking ices, bearing and clothing. When the two isitors stood before him, Alacha was stroking ie feathers of his pet, seemingly indifferent to ieir presence.

This irked Abdul Dost, who was ever straightrward.

"I have a message for your ear alone, Alacha, ndholder of the Mogul," he said directly. Dismiss your men." For some Turkoman ards had lingered near at hand.

Alacha turned his head enough to make rtain that the untouched dishes of the morng meal remained on the cloth for the enterinment of guests.

"Sit, distinguished *mansabdar*," he murured, "and partake of my humble bounty. las, these savage hills offer little that is dainty food."

Abdul Dost remained grimly erect.

"Until I have spoken my message and reived an answer I will not break my fast, lacha, and then not at your cloth."

"Know you not the courtesy of the court, orthy warrior?" responded Alacha. "Why ive you come, bearing arms, to the tent of our superior?"

With a short laugh Abdul Dost tapped the lt of his simitar.

"This weapon, Alacha, has served the Mogul ore than once; and as for my companion, beuse of aid he once rendered to Nur-Jahan, ho is to be Jahangir's queen-bride, his right wear sword is unquestioned."

Alacha did not press his point, yet signed to s men to remain where they were. So the ree faced one another, Khlit watching quietly, ily half-catching what was said, dul Dost ipatient and more than a little surprized at e almost effeminate aspect of the man who id brought terror into the hills of his people. he Slayer noted every move of his visitors id every change of expression without seemg to do so, but for the most part his attenon was devoted to Khlit.

He heard immovably Abdul Dost's recital the oppression that had come upon Badakan, of the hunger of the villages, the anger the hunting and the spoil taken by the ents of the *jagirdar*.

"There is no merchant but seeks to leave dakshan because when by hard labor and rift he increases his property, the *bakhshi* who your treasurer levies upon him the sum of s profits. No peasant can keep his rds, for the animals are driven off by ur soldiers. Weapons are seized wherever and—and how is an Afghan to live, weapons?"

Carefully Alacha adjusted the silk hood over his pet.

"Those who had gold or silver—and they are few in this land," went on the *mansabdar* bitterly, "have buried it, so now none is to be had, save what you seize. One-third of the young men of the tribes are called upon for military service, and their sisters have been carried off by your men in raids which you have not sought to punish. Badakshan bleeds, and your hand holds the knife. That is my message."

The hood tied to his satisfaction, Alacha turned his attention to a dish of sweetments and selected a sugared pomegranate with care.

"When sickness afflicts a human body, worthy *mansabdar*, does not a skilled physician bleed the patient?"

"Nay—if death is the result of the bloodletting. Allah alone decides the life and death of men."

"Of men, verily. Yet these scum of the hills be but low-born beggars, and their fathers before them were thieves. Who shall treat a jackal like a hunting-dog, or a miscreant like a man of honor?"

Alacha's black eyes snapped as he glanced swiftly up at Abdul Dost.

"Soldier, who sent you?"

Under his mustache the *mansabdar* smiled.

"Am I one to carry another's words? Alacha, it is the truth I speak. What will you answer?"

"You have been in the villages?"

The Turkoman's keen eyes seemed to probe out the information he sought.

"Bah—the bazaars will have their tale, and dogs will growl. Perchance the threadbare mullahs have poured the poison of their anger into your ears. Muhammad Asad, perchance?"

Abdul Dost's scarred face gave him the secret he angled for.

"By the beard of the Prophet! It was Muhammad Asad."

"Alacha, you have the blood of a woman on your hands. You know the law. Men will gather in pursuit of blood——"

"So they talk thus? Nay, the wanton of the village who was enamoured of a wandering minstrel slew herself."

Abdul Dost shook his head grimly. Always a man of meager speech, anxiety weighed upon him. Much depended upon the reply of Alacha.

"Your answer?" he asked again.

"To the men of Badakshan—nothing. To you, Abdul Dost, who are in the service of the Mogul, this."

The Turkoman spoke softly, almost idly.

"You complain of money exacted. It is to pay the price of my *jagir* to the treasurer of the Mogul who bestowed it upon me. You speak of men slain and other hardships. Consider the maxim of the Koran that ill-doers

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shall taste the fruits of their evil. The Afghans are lawless; the hand that governs them must be stern."

At this Abdul Dost stroked his beard gravely.

"Then you will not hear the council of the head men, nor make amends for the misdeeds of your men?"

"Nay."

"Then, Alacha, give heed to what also is written in the book of our faith. An eye shall be given for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life——"

Swiftly the noble rose, drawing back the flap of the tent. Standing almost bre st to breast against Abdul Dost, he pointed to the embroidered banner that hung at the enclosure entrance.

"Behold the standard of the Mogul, soldier," he said calmly. "It is the standard you have followed in battle. By this sign may you know I am master of Badakshan."

Before Abdul Dost could reply he turned quickly to Khlit and spoke in the steppe dialect of Turki.

"Warrior, my heart is opened like a flower at sight of your face. The Master of the World has sent for you. Too long your sword has been absent from his court."

KHLIT, hands thrust into his belt, booted feet wide apart and sheepskin hat thrust carelessly askew on his gray hair, looked at the Slayer curiously. Alacha stooped to draw the parchment *firman* from his silver chest. Before exhibiting it to Khlit he asked quickly:

"You have skill to read? You also, Abdul Dost?"

"Not I," responde l the old warrior indifferently. "Such scrawls are for priests and dogs of councilors who live by words."

Abdul Dost shook his head, moody at the reception accorded his message.

"This is from the hand of Jahangir, the Sun of Benevolence, Monarch of Hindustan."

Alacha exhibited the imperial seal.

"It is a summons to the court which now holds festival at Lahore, not six days' ride from the southern passes of Badakshan. There welcome awaits you, gifts that Jahangir alone can bestow, a robe of honor, a horse from the pick of the imperial stable and rank in the army of India."

Khlit took the missive in his gaunt hand curiously and passed it back to the *jagirdar* silently.

"Do not fail to obey the request of the emperor," pressed Alacha. "The imperial favor shines upon few. Nur-Jahan, it is said, is your friend, and the Light of the World sways our prince with a single word. High honor is yours for the taking; rest and wealth for your old age."

"I would like a good horse," observed Khlit.

"It is yours. It is my exalted privilege to be bearer of the *firman* of my lord the Mogul."

Alacha bowed his dark head.

"Jahangir desires your presence. I would that I were in your place!"

Smilingly he watched his two visitors depart. When they had mounted and vanished through the enclosure gate the smile passed from his olive face as if by magic and he scowled, spitting upon the ground where Abdul Dost had stood. Then he called for a mounted messenger.

Kneeling upon the white cloth, he seized parchment and a feathered pen and laboriously wrote something. These he read over carefully befo e sealing. They were addressed to a high official of the court—to the vizier, in fact, who had sent the missive Alacha had shown to Khlit, and who was in favor with Jahangir and his queen-to-be.

As the letter of the vizier had been in Persian—a language unknown to Abdul Dost, who clung to his native tongue, and hence undecipherable by the *mansabdar* as the Slayer well knew—Alacha had written his reply in the flowery phrases of the Persian courtiers:

> Perfection of nobility, star of grandeur, glorious son of Jamshyd, pillar of empire and monument of magnanimity: I, unworthy as the dust beneath thy horse's hoofs, presume to address thee in the matter of the unrest amid the scorpion-nest of Badakshan.
>
> The exalted message of thy wisdom, that "all who lift high their heads among the Afghans should have their heads stricken from their shoulders," has delighted my eyes. Yet to accomplish thy lofty aim, it has been necessary for me to pretend that thy words were otherwise—to the warrior known as the Curved Saber who now rides to Lahore with my assurance that the sun of imperial favor is inclined to shine upon him.
>
> Since this warrior is notable in craft and feats of arms, thy wisdom will perceive that it is best to retain him at court away from these ill-omened ones of Badakshan. Gain then the ear of Jahangir, to the end that Khlit be granted some trifling favor such as a robe of honor or a horse. Nur-Jahan, the favorite, has regard for the ancient warrior.
>
> If gifts will not nourish his restless spirit in peace, then, O vizier, chains and perchance the cells of eye-blinding Gwalior must play their part——

The missive closed with elaborate compliments and promises of extensive payment of presents of camels, cloth, weapons and women and boy servitors from Alacha to the Mogul at the coming festival.

This accomplished and the messenger dismissed, Alacha instructed certain spies among the Hazara peasants who had been won to his cause by rich bribes to keep close track of the

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ovements of Abdul Dost. No Afghans, as lacha well knew, would play the part of a y or betray their leader.

From the peasants he turned with a grimace his own officers.

"Hold a muster of my soldiery," he comanded. "Send a party of horsemen to hunt wn that mad priest, Muhammad Asad, and other to fetch me the witless minstrel Chan. rip him of weapons and clothing and sew m into the fresh hide of a bullock where he ay have his fill of blood and sing odes to his ad mistress to his heart's content."

ABDUL DOST and Khlit reined in their horses by mutual consent where the path to the Shyr neck intersected e trail along which they were riding. Here ey were on a slight hillock that afforded a ew over the fertile, rolling plain of Badakshan. But the fields beside the trail, illumined by e warm sun of early Autumn, showed only mpled grain in which a broken wooden plow r like some forlorn gravestone in a desecrated metery.

On the other side of the highway a shepherd tched them listlessly, lying with his dog the edge of a willow thicket. No sheep were sible as Abdul Dost noticed. Below them e huts of a village clustered about a dark ol of water, and around this squatted a ring cloaked figures.

Along a wooded ridge beyond the village tted a body of horse, their spear-tips glitterg within the thin foliage of aspens and cypress, d the glint of armor showing under rich stments—Turkoman riders in the service Alacha.

Abdul Dost surveyed them moodily, gazing m the almost inanimate villagers to the dark tches of pines that reached up over his head the edge of timber-line. He raised his eyes serried peaks, towering high against the ue vault of the sky. The rarefied air of that itude revealed valleys and peaks alike with rtling distinctness.

Emerging from an ice-coated morain, two gles circled over the pine-tops on tranquil ngs. Abdul Dost pointed to them.

"They are of the hills," he muttered, "and edom is their life. Allah the all-wise has creed that they shall be spared the yoke servitude."

Long and searchingly he gazed at Khlit's gged features.

"You and I have slept under the stars tother these many nights, and we have partaken the same salt. You have drawn your reins ng the path I have followed—until now. you abide in Badakshan, or ride through e Khyber to the court at Lahore?"

Carefully he concealed his own deep interest Khlit's answer. The presence of the veteran warrior in Abdul Dost's land meant much to him. He had come to rely upon the wisdom of the former Cossack. With unrest and strife in the air of the hills he was loath to have Khlit depart.

On the other hand, with honor and ease awaiting him at the court of India, Abdul Dost would not ask Khlit to share his own unsettled fortunes further.

Torn between soldierly loyalty to the Mogul and love for his own people now suffering at the hand of Alacha, Abdul Dost had his problem to thresh out, his decision to make. And so he yearned for the companionship of the man who had been a true friend, sharer of his tent and food through many adventures in which the skilled sword of Abdul Dost had aided Khlit as often as the old warrior's craft had served them both.

"What think you?"

Khlit leaned thoughtfully upon his saddle-peak, questioning his friend with shrewd gray eyes set in a network of wrinkles but still keen.

"The good-will of Jahangir is a jewel beyond price."

Khlit nodded slowly, meditating aloud.

"Never have I seen this Mogul, Abdul Dost, who calls himself Lord of the World. There should be great warriors at his table, and much feasting and wise words."

"Aye," said Abdul Dost.

"Also gold. I have no gold. Nor a good horse, other than this steppe pony."

"Aye."

"In spite of himself Abdul Dost's frank face clouded under Khlit's gaze.

"These things, assuredly, you would have. Did you not fetch Nur-Jahan safely from the mountains of Tartary—" he waved a lean hand to the north and east where the giant peaks of the Himalayas were dimly to be discerned —"when you rode hither from the horde of the Tatar Khans?"

"She, also, will remember."

"Aye," somewhat dryly.

"As for the Mogul, is he not of the blood of the ancient Mongol khans whose forebear was Genghis, the Great? In my veins runs the blood of Genghis. This thing I would tell him, Abdul Dost. As for a woman, her will is the wind's will."

"And so you go to the court?"

Abdul Dost checked what he would have said, and lifted hand and head.

"That is well. May your shadow grow, and your years be ripe with honor."

"My years come to an end. And honor—" Khlit smiled grimly—"is there any honor other than the friendship of true men?"

He took up his reins, squaring his shoulders, and felt of saddle-bags and girdle wherein were whetstone and a brace of Turkish pistols.

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"Abdul Dost, give me your hand. I ride far, but with the first snowfall in the mountains I shall come back to Badakshan and seek you."

Just a little, the Afghan shook his head, his eyes straying to the valley.

"What is written is written. This is farewell."

Long and earnestly the two looked into each other's eyes as they clasped hands after the custom of Khlit. And thus each spoke briefly, concealing the anxiety that weighed on them.

In Khlit's mind rang the words of the blind priest, foretelling battle in the land of his friend, and in his soul was a great curiosity as to the friendship of princes, and whether indeed the Mogul was a man of his word.

In Abdul Dost's thoughts was the certainty that he would not see Khlit again, in his heart the crying need of companionship in difficulty. But of this he would not speak, fearing to obstruct the path of Khlit's good fortune.

He watched his friend ride away along the path to the south, between rising shoulders of barren, sandstone summits. Until Khlit's sheepskin hat had vanished around a turn in the trail he remained motionless.

The he picked up his reins and moved onward along the highway at a walk, tugging the head of his horse aside as the beast, from long habit, sought to follow Khlit's mount.

CHAPTER IV

To the builder of empire, the opener of roads, the healer of sickness, the planner of cities—respect.

For the bearer of water, the tiller of fields, the wielder of a protecting sword—gratitude.

To the wearer of another's sword, the crown of another's greatness, and to him who sits in another's throne—terror.

FROM father to son, the thrones of Agra, Delhi, Chitore, Kabul had passed, from Baber, the first great figure in history among the Moguls, who carved the empire of India out of chaos with his sword, to Humayon, the chivalrous, to Akbar, Jallal' u'din Akbar, who knit together the warring provinces of the empire by supreme diplomacy and humane law-making, to Jahangir.

And during the reign of Jahangir the empire of the Moguls reached its zenith.

The World-Gripper inherited much of the hardiness of his forebears, and added thereto many vices of his own. Born in the shadow of a mighty throne, already acclaimed by a multitude of servants, he was not forced to undergo the healthful discipline of privation. Clever, unquestionably, supremely courteous at occasion, he was narrow of mind, hasty of temper, cruel when aroused, and always suspicious.

Of Turki-Mongol father and Hindu mother, schooled by Persian wiseacres, he revealed the traits of mixed breeding. A lover of women of many races, pampered of body and gross of appetite, the traces of degeneracy that were to mark the downfall of the Moguls already appeared in him.

Yet at that time, as it is written in the annals of his reign, when the favorable constellation of Aries was rising into the sky, the supremacy of Delhi and Agra over the world from the Indian Sea to the territory of the once-powerful Mongol khans, from Ethiopia to China, was at its height.

The brilliancy of the Mogul court was the talk of the outer world. Ambassadors came from Tibet, Khorassan, Africa, to receive magnificent presents. Portuguese priests, envoys and soldiers had established themselves at court; Hawkins was sailing thither from England, to be the forerunner of the East India Company; France, under Louis XIII, was rising to greatness in Europe; the Ming dynasty in China was at its brightest.

But the empire of the Mogul was supreme. Envoys from *Feranguistan* (Europe) were regarded as visitors from inferior states. The fiery Rajputs were held in temporary check; the Maharattas, Persians and Turks acknowledged the overlordship of Agra; only the Afghans maintained pretense of liberty.

At this time the revenues of the Mogul are estimated at two hundred million rupees, and the men under arms at four hundred thousand. And these were composed largely of the pick of the warlike Rajputs, the Punjabis, Turks, and Persians with a smattering of Portuguese mercenaries—"musket-men, or matchlock-men."

And in the rising tide of his power Jahangir held festival at Lahore, capital of the province of the Five Rivers, in that year. The rainy season had passed and the river had sunk to its bed; leaving a vast stretch of mud between water and the lofty buildings of the palaces.

On the high-water mark of the river-bank Jahangir in his whim had ordered a gold chain to be placed. This chain ran into the main hall of his palace, where it was connected with a series of sixty golden bells.

"So that any man of the land may have justice," Jahangir had said. "No matter who he may be, let him touch the gold chain and the bells will sound in my ear. Thus will I dispense the imperial mercy."

Courtiers had acclaimed the words, yet guards had been placed at the river-bank to protect the gold of the chain, and it came to pass in time that these guards had considered it part of their duty to keep away any who sought to meddle with the chain of justice as it was called. Their officers had hinted that the peace of the mighty monarch was not lightly to be disturbed.

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hus the bells had been silent, and as
ngir feasted on a certain night in his ban-
hall their presence was all but forgotten
imself and the ameers in attendance.
hangir sat upon a slight dais facing the
of nobles, Hindu and Moslem, who shared
him the dainties of northern fruits; wine—
the monarch chose to ignore the Moslem
at nights—and meats cut skilfully from
choicer portions of game slain that day in
near-by jungle whither the court had come
scape the heat of late Summer in the dry
of Hindustan.
e was a stout, broad-faced man, with sharp
k eyes, clean-shaven except for a dark
tache. Garbed in a comfortable silk tunic
small, pearl-sewn turban, his hands, neck
head were brilliant with jewels. Behind
unnoticed, glimmered the gold bells in
h and candle light. Often he laughed at
mpliment or jest from his ameers, for the
uet had endured many hours and heating
of spirits had touched bearded lips as
icians made merry behind screens of lat-
work.
, being in high good humor, the World-
per listened to a favorite vizier who whis-
d respectfully in his ear.
My *Padishah*, light of my eyes and guider
y fortunes, a common soldier waits to at-
you, sent from your zealous servant
ha. Khlit is his name, and he is the
ng (European) who once had the all-de-
s privilege of serving Nur-Jahan, Light
he World——"
I will receive his presents."
he monarch's geniality was heightened
mention of the favorite whom he desired
e all other to make his wife.
t this the vizier hesitated, for Khlit had
ght no gifts, as was customary—in fact,
none to bring. Mentally the courtier
med up the old warrior's meager possessions
announced smilingly that Khlit's most
ed treasures, sword—a fine, curved sword,
ared the courtier—and his horse were at
disposal of the Mogul.
My *Padishah*," he purred, bowing, for
ha had remembered him with no little
, "your *fagirdar* who holds the turbulent
hans trembling before the sound of the
e of your authority, has sent a string of
long-haired Bactrian camels laden with
and silk cloth as a gift to lay before your
. He humbly asks that some robe of honor
ccorded the warrior, who is a power among
wild Mongol khans of the north. One
lacha's spies—a priest, among the Mongols
he steppe—spoke to him before this of the
er of the khan."
ahangir's benignity waxed amain. The
els were a welcome addition to his animals
the military train. He nodded, and the
sentries at the farther end of the hall ushered in Khlit.

Courtiers and monarch alike stared at the gaunt figure of the Cossack, and many whispers went the rounds exclaiming upon the uncouthness of the newcomer's dress and the rude insolence of his bearing.

For, instead of performing the salaam as he had been instructed or even touching his hand to the floor and then to his forehead, Khlit advanced among the banquet cloths with his accustomed swaggering gait and raised his hand, bending his head slightly.

THE spectators looked from him to the emperor and at the vizier curiously. Khlit stood before the sitting monarch quite calmly, meeting his frowning stare fairly.

"*Padishah salamet!*" he exclaimed in broken Turki, and the plump, bejeweled councilor frowned and grimaced behind Jahangir, at the unequaled effrontery of utterance before the emperor should be pleased to speak.

But chance worked in Khlit's favor. Jahangir had frowned, whereat the courtiers murmured and half-rose, sensing the displeasure of their lord. Yet the World-Gripper was meditating, rather pleasantly than otherwise.

"I am told," his cultured voice observed clearly, "that you have been a leader of the Mongol khans who enjoy the honor of being our neighbors. Doubtless you have come to pay your respects to the Presence. It rejoices us greatly that the barbarians of the north have bent their eyes before the sun of India."

The idea of a representative from the descendants of Genghis Khan attending upon his pleasure rather interested the man to whom power was the breath of life. Uncouth as Khlit might be, and uncertain as his mission to the court certainly was—save for the hinted message of Alacha that the vizier had not seen fit to reveal in full—it was characteristic of Jahangir that he chose instantly to assume that Khlit could be placed on par with the other outlandish envoys of Ethiopia, Abyssinia and Tibet who at present added to his pomp, eating their heads off the while.

Khlit, not understanding, looked calmly and inquiringly at the vizier, who quickly paraphrased the monarch's remarks, altering their meaning.

"Warrior, the Master of the Universe asks if you be related by blood to the Mongol khans. Alacha informs me you once held rank among them."

"Aye," assented Khlit readily.

The vizier salaamed.

"My *Padishah*," he cried, "the warrior places himself at the call of your pleasure."

In this fashion did a skilful diplomat cover over the perils that threatened from Khlit's

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introduction. Jahangir was pleased. The reminder of his own importance went to his head like wine.

"Let the graybeard keep his horse and sword," he responded—which was well, as Khlit would never have suffered parting from his weapon. "We will add the word-defying grace of womanly beauty to the value of the slight gifts from our hand. Let Nur Jahan herself be summoned from the imperial quarters to place at his waist a better sword. Meanwhile robe him in a cloth-of-gold *khilat*, as is meet for the eyes of the Splendor of the World."

Khlit looked curiously at the resplendent garment that was drawn over his rough sheepskin coat and at the girdle of many colored silk placed around his leather belt. He listened silently to the announcement that a satin tent had been placed at his disposal near the cantonment of the personal cavalry of the emperor, a tent with a native servant—in the pay of the vizier who was Alacha's friend. Only at mention of a blooded Arabian horse did he nod, well pleased.

Jahangir turned to his wine, relishing his whim, and looked on with all the artless pleasure of a pleased child when the stately figure of veiled Nur-Jahan came into the room. The nobles rose and bowed profoundly.

Khlit scanned the woman who had come in his care from the plains of Tartary to the arms of the Mogul, admiring the brilliance of her Indian dress, the pearls in her black hair. But—as etiquette demanded—she did not speak before she took a gold-inlaid simitar from one of the *bakhshis* in attendance.

This she passed through the silk girdle about the warrior, saying:

"It is a weapon of proved, Damascus steel, precious as the metal with which it is wrought. Wear it on behalf of the one who gives it."

At this Jahangir smiled, and the courtiers murmured politely. Only one—a northern noble related to Alacha, Paluwan Khan, of the Mavr-un-nahr Turks—whispering that to gird on two swords was an omen of war to the death.

But Khlit reflected that Nur-Jahan had changed. Once she had been talkative, had laughed readily and artlessly. Now her fine eyes—all that he could see—were melancholy. Bending closer as she gave the weapon a last pat, she said softly—

"You have won the favor of Jahangir, yet watch for treachery among the ameers."

She bent her veiled head profoundly before the monarch who had sent for her from the ends of his kingdom and who loved her deeply, acknowledged the salutation of the courtiers and vanished between the draperies through which she had come.

Had Nur-Jahan enjoyed at that time the mastery over the narrow-minded emperor which she assumed—to the everlasting good of India—at a later period, she might have spoken more boldly. Perhaps, for she was a woman of keen insight and rare statesmanship, she might have averted the tragedy that was to come to pass among the Afghan hills.

"Bid the Mongol take his place among the lesser ameers," ordered Jahangir, "and see that he never lacks for food or comfort. Request him to be often before our eyes, and especially when we debate as we will soon do upon certain matters of warfare."

Thus Khlit took his place at one of the farther settees, at the banquet, and ate and drank heartily, meditating the while upon the reception he had been accorded, upon the man who was monarch of many million souls, and upon the warning of Nur-Jahan.

The ameers accepted him for the most part with polite curiosity, some with friendliness and some few—from the northern provinces—with veiled jealousy.

Silently, for he understood little that was said, he watched the pomp and panoply of the richest court in the world. He appeared at the *levees*, came mounted on his new Arab to the ceremonious guard-mount wherein Rajput and Moslem alternated in attendance before the quarters of the emperor.

He studied the immense throngs of camp-followers, merchants, soldiery, and envoys that filled the narrow streets of Lahore, crowding the tall, wooden buildings. He even asked the meaning of the gold chain at the river-bank.

Thus for several days Khlit dwelt in the camp of the Mogul, awaiting the time when he had been told he would be called upon to speak in council, received generally with respect, thanks to the favor Nur-Jahan had shown him. Unlike the ameers and the officers who went everywhere mounted on elephants and accompanied by gorgeously clad followers, Khlit kept to himself for the most part, spending long intervals in meditation in his tent.

"The woman remembered," he said to himself. "Will the man forget?"

Always he watched the faces of the ameers studying their customs and looking on at the machinery of empire, especially the routine of the army. Long hours were spent in investigating the elephant artillery, the corps of camel guns, the Portuguese company of musketeers and the numerous native cavalry. What he saw he kept to himself, awaiting the time to speak.

CHAPTER V

THE BELLS OF JUSTICE

IT WAS one evening when the coolness of early night brought the nobles to the palace and the usual feasting that Khlit made his memorable response to a question of Jahangir.

The emperor had been closeted with some of

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his more intimate councilors, and had instructed certain officers of the army—Abdullah Khan, newly arrived from victories in the Dekkan; Raja Man Singh, leader of the Rajputs, Paluwan Khan and the aged I'timad-doulat, father of Nur-Jahan—to attend him. Khlit was among the number.

The screens had been drawn from the arched embrasures overlooking the river. The last glow of sunset cast a half-light over the lighted bazaars of the city, wherein throngs still bartered, quarreled and sang. Jahangir had drawn his officers slightly apart from the rest of the courtiers. Bowls of wine had been filled and emptied.

As a mark of high favor Jahangir had tasted some delicacy and ordered his servants to place the dish before Abdullah Khan, who rose and bowed. The monarch did likewise with Khlit, who, not liking the dainty set before him, left it untasted.

"What!" smiled the Mogul, who was disposed to be gracious. "Does our choice offend the taste of the great Mongol?"

"*Padishah*," bowed the vizier who was the friend of Alacha, "he is voiceless, overwhelmed by the ocean of your magnanimity."

"He is a boor," whispered one ameer.

"A witless barbarian," scoffed Paluwan Khan. "With but one horse."

Khlit understood much of what was said.

"A horse," he responded slowly, "carried Genghis Khan where an elephant could not go—to mastery in battle."

A heavy silence fell upon those of the assemblage—and they were many—who heard this remark. Experienced courtiers, smooth-faced Turks, intriguers from the court of the Sultan of Constantinople, bearded Armenian moneylenders, elaborately robed emissaries from the declining Caliphate of Bagdad, alert Persians—all glanced discreetly at the Mogul to see how he would take the words. For only Jahangir and his ameers rode upon elephants. But the Mogul, still disposed to treat Khlit agreeably for certain reasons known to himself, laughed, taking the response to apply only to Paluwan Khan.

"*Kaber dar* (have care) warrior," he cried. "Did not we ourself mount this day upon the back of a favorite royal male elephant and shoot blunted arrows of gold among the multitude in honor of the victories of worthy Abdullah Khan over the low-born malcontents of the Dekkan? Aye, we scattered jewels from the balcony of the palace——"

He broke off, struck by a fresh thought. Khlit was silent, waiting for what was to come. The vizier had whispered, when the wine-cups first circulated, that Jahangir would make a request of him.

"The constellation of Aries arises," murmured the Mogul. "The year is rife with omen for our reign. Come, our wisest masters of warfare are gathered here. Who can decide my question—what is the best weapon?"

Inquiringly he glanced at the half-nude Ethiopians, who grinned stupidly, their round heads rolling on sweaty shoulders, what with the influence of strong distilled arrack that they guzzled greedily.

"Bah," murmured Jahangir to the vizier petulantly, "their skulls avail not save for drinking-cups for their foes. No presents did they bring save some worthless slaves, the hide of an ass and an ox-horn filled with civet."

"*Padishah*," smiled the councilor, "doubtless the slaves were some of the three hundred children of the barbarous negro chief."

"And the skin," put in Paluwan Khan, who possessed a sharp tongue, "was taken from a dead ass by the roadside——"

"The civet," added a Persian, not to be outdone, "is what they covet to drown the stench of their bodies——"

The good-natured but uncomprehending negroes grinned on. Jahangir passed by the leopardskin-clad Abyssinians with the remark that only an animal would take the hide of a beast to cover its buttocks.

But Paluwan Khan gave answer that the mace, favorite weapon of the Turkomans, was best. A slim Kashmiri noble raised a voice for the arrow, that struck down at a distance. Soft-spoken Hindus argued for the spear, and the talkative Persian avowed that the javelin was most useful, since it combined the functions of spear and arrow.

The discussion was witty, ceremonious. Khlit tried to understand it, his head bent as if listening for something he did not hear. Then Raja Man Singh, descendant of kings who traced their lineage to the gods, leader of the clans of Marwar and Oudh—warriors born and bred—called out in a clear voice:

"The sword, O prince. The sword is the arm of chivalry, the weapon of the Rajput. With these others a man may strike but once; with a sword is he master of many blows."

At this Khlit, to whom the speech was translated, nodded sagely. Closely he looked at the Rajput noble, marking his open, intelligent face as if he wished to remember it well.

"Yet these weapons suffice but for the individual," began Jahangir again. "I speak of battles. You have all said that never was there an army in the world such as mine. What is the best weapon by which we may strike those who are our foes?"

Those who knew him best were well aware that a purpose underlay the idle words of the monarch. Eyes met eyes inquiringly, and jeweled hands fingered well-trimmed mustaches.

"How may we smite those of ill-fortune who on our marches have sinned against Allah and

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our empire by arraying themselves in battle-ranks?"

A massive, black-faced Turk salaamed, bellowing in a hearty voice:

"Great Sultan, give me leave to set my cannon-mouths against the miscreants. Verily I will erect a barricade of withes, carts and iron chains between my roarers and blow this accursed scum to ——."

So spoke the chief of the artillery, one Ra'd-andaz Khan, the Lord Thunder-Thrower.

"And by the thundering cannon," added the captain of the Portuguese mercenaries, "I will place my matchlock-men to pick off the leaders of the traitors and stay their charge. Thus will I serve the Lord of India!"

Jahangir glanced at Abdullah Khan, fresh from conquest.

"Mirror of the Glory of Allah, Index of the Book of Creation, Refuge of the World," uttered that successful leader smoothly, "under your gracious words my heart expands. Yet before your wisdom my knowledge is like a grain of sand, lying below a lofty mountain. As you know, wise intrigue and offers of wealth undermine the strength of our foes."

Raja Man Singh frowned at the stilted phrases.

"Lord," he cried, "the best of battle is the charge at pace, that scatters the ranks of an enemy fairly."

Jahangir smiled at the Rajput whose reckless bravery was a saying in the land, and turned to Khlit.

"Warrior," he observed, "men say that you are a Rustum of the Age, a master of battles, leader of the Mongols. I await your answer."

Thoughtfully Khlit looked from the raja to the Mogul.

"Lord," he said gravely, "have you forgotten the *tulughma?*"

Frowning, the Mogul shook his broad head as if trying to recall a familiar phrase. Ameer glanced at ameer. The vizier hastily prompted Khlit to explain the word.

"It is the weapon of Genghis Khan, your ancestor," continued the old warrior. "It is the 'Mongol swoop.' By it he defeated—" Khlit looked in turn from Paluwan Khan to the man from Baghdad, and to Raja Man Singh—"Turkoman, Caliph, and Hindu."

"I have heard the phrase," Jahangir nodded, leaning back upon his cushions almost under the golden bells. "What is the maneuver?"

"A charge," responded Khlit through his interpreter, "yet not the charge of the Rajput. A flight of arrows, yet not the arrow-flights of your archers. A strategem that is not the deceit of Abdullah Khan."

"The *tulughma?* I know it not."

"Lord, if your army faced the Mongols in battle you would see the swoop of Genghis Khan. Are the deeds of the first of your race no longer sung by your bards?"

Impatiently Jahangir toyed with his necklace. Petulantly he spoke:

"Graybeard, these are parables. Come, I have a thought for what you must do. You will reveal this maneuver in actual warfare. Warrior, I have shown you favor, and I have decided that you will accompany my army which is about to set out."

He sat erect, glancing at his ameers.

"My servants, the dark head of rebellion has arisen in the empire. The message came to my ear this nightfall. You must mount for war on my behalf——"

The Mogul fell silent, but no spoken word had arrested his speech. The golden bells of justice had given tongue.

Close by his head they echoed in chiming melody, faint tinkling mingled with sonorous deep-toned note. For the first time in Lahore the bells had sounded.

DUST-STAINED, haggard of face and feverish of eye, his clothing streaked with mud, his velvet cloak bespattered and torn, Chan the minstrel kneeled before the Mogul.

"Justice!" he cried. "My lord, justice for the wronged!"

Rather pleased than otherwise was Jahangir the Mogul at sight of the suppliant form. Not a little surprized was he, however, for since the day of the guards no commoner had lightly approached the gold bell-rope. Still more aroused was he when a slave whispered that the newcomer had cast the guard at the rope into the mud of the river-bed when the sentinel had sought to restrain him.

"Speak!" he commanded. "The gate of the court of mercy is open to you."

Chan raised his bare head, his features tense with youthful anxiety.

"Lord of the World," he muttered, his voice rising as he half-chanted his message, "holy men have been slain. Mullahs, brothers of Muhammed Asad, who is beloved of God, have been done to death by lawless men. I saw women taken into the bondage of lust, and villages burned. I have come from the tribes over which you are lord in pursuit of justice."

"Who is this slayer?"

"Lord, your lips have framed his name—Alacha, the Slayer. And the tribes are the Afghans."

At this the sparkle died from the black eyes of the monarch. The interest that had given life to his pale face faded, and he frowned.

"The Afghans sent you?" He spoke sharply, evidently irritated.

"Nay, my lord."

Chan dwelled on the face of the monarch anxiously.

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"Unbidden I came to beg of you the royal justice. The Afghans ask no mercy."

Almost indifferently Jahangir turned aside, speaking softly to his nearest attendants, among them the vizier. The ameers stared curiously at the minstrel as if at a man condemned.

"My servants," the Mogul addressed them again, ignoring Chan, "this ill-fortuned one has voiced the tidings I was about to relate. In the hills of the Afghans within rebellious Badakshan men are arming for revolt as is their custom. The tribes have mounted for war, impiously spurning my authority and acclaiming a leader of their own——"

"Lord," the minstrel, unused to court etiquette, interrupted, "they seek but to defend themselves against oppression. Wrong has been done by Alacha. Wherefore I, a suppliant, came to the gold bell of which I had heard. Would you close the gates of justice against my plea——"

His high voice trailed off hopelessly as two armed servitors approached him at a sign from the vizier. Jahangir's frown deepened. He did not altogether relish having the tale of how a claimant for justice had been received repeated throughout his kingdom.

"Personal wrong-doing," he salved his conscience, "ever merits our attention. Yet this Alacha is a faithful servant of our standard, and his acts are in the interest of our rule. We can not pardon rebellion."

A wave of his hand dismissed the minstrel, who had risen moodily to his feet.

"Throw him from the summit of the palace. Yet—" he fingered his tiny gold simitar irresolutely—"hold! Even to such a villainous conspirator does our mercy extend. Bear him to the quarters of our outer guards and there have the sinews of his knees severed, that he will bear no more messages."

A complimentary murmur greeted this manifestation of the royal clemency. Only Chan, drawing his slim figure erect, smiled bitterly.

"For his mercy," he said slowly, "I thank my lord, the Mogul."

Unseen, Khlit rose in his corner and moved toward Chan. This act, however, caught the eye of the watchful vizier, who whispered to Jahangir. "*Padishah*, River of Unending Forgiveness, before this dark one came you were speaking to the Mongol——"

"True. Your reminder reveals the zeal of a faithful servant."

New animation flooded the smooth countenance of the monarch, who motioned to Khlit as Chan was led out—the minstrel casting the while a scornful glance at the warrior whom he had last seen in company with Abdul Dost.

"Dog, who feeds from the Mogul's table," whispered the boy with the hot scorn of youth, passing Khlit as he went by between the guards.

Khlit, heedful of Jahangir, paid no attention beyond a quick glance.

CHAPTER VI

THE SONG OF CHAN

"OLD warrior, now is the moment when you may show gratitude for the costly simitar given to you, and the robe of honor. When my army mounts for the Afghan campaign you will ride with the ameers—Raja Man Singh, the Brave"—the Rajput bent his head at this—"Paluwan Khan, the Lord Thunder-Thrower, and my faithful *ferangs*, the musket-men. Your words of the Mongol battles have struck my fancy. Teach Raja Man Singh this *tulughma* of yours and gifts you have received will be as nought beside the treasure I will bestow."

So spoke the Mogul, and the warrior heard the words interpreted, standing in silence, his lined face thoughtful.

"Can the Rajputs ride as the Mongols did?" he asked bluntly.

"By the many-armed gods!" The Raja sprang from his seat, but Jahangir waved him aside.

"We shall see. That will be your task—to cooperate with the Prince of Marwar in crushing this snake which has turned against me. Abdul Dost has assumed the leadership of the Afghans and raised the unholy standard of revolt. He—son of Sulieman—was once in my pay. Now is he branded an outlaw, and rebel."

Moodily Khlit raised his eyes.

"Lord," his deep voice addressed the interpreter, "is not Abdul Dost the son of Mongol fathers? His ancestors were yours—Genghis and Timurlane, the Conquerors. His land is the homeland of the Moguls."

Sheer surprize kept Jahangir silent.

"Abdul Dost served you well," went on the warrior gruffly, for he chose his words with difficulty. "Have you forgotten? Nay, it was to ask you this and to require your aid for him and his people that I rode hither."

Ameer glanced at ameer mockingly. Paluwan Khan lay back on his cushions well-pleased. The vizier sighed in sheer relief. His task of spying upon Khlit was done.

With a single sentence the warrior had cast into the balance the favor he had earned from Jahangir.

"The quarrel of Abdul Dost is just," explained Khlit earnestly. "Consider it in wise council among your captains. His quarrel is with Alacha, who is both evil-doer and tyrant. Behead Alacha and place Abdul Dost in his stead."

A courtier laughed impulsively at this, and the sound broke the gathering wrath of Jahangir, who reflected that Khlit was after all a

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common soldier and an uncouth man, knowing nought of affairs of state.

"Set an Afghan to rule Afghans?" he cried. "A wolf to lead wolves? Nay, Alacha at my bidding has had the heads of the leading men in Badakshan carried around on poles. As fast as he does so these dark ones set up another leader. So long as there is any trace of the people of Badakshan they will keep up this disturbance."

His brow darkened again at this, and a flush rose in his cheeks. That morning during the hunt two beaters had unluckily come upon the scene when Jahangir had been about to shoot down a fine nilgau and the incident still rankled, although the monarch had had the feet cut from under the two.

"Ho, warrior, by Allah and all his saints!"

Jahangir bethought him of the Hindus present.

"And by Vishnu and Siva! You presume upon our good-will mightily. Yet you may atone for your mistake——"

Twice within the hour had the voice of Chan interrupted his imperial master. The notes of a song in a strong youthful voice came wafted through the open embrasures that gave on the river, where the guardhouse stood.

"False as hell is the Mogul's word,
Tarnished and broken the Mogul sword!"

Several of the courtiers moved toward the windows to draw the screens.

"Evil fruit from the Mogul's seed,
And the faith of the Mogul is lost indeed——"

Came the echo of a distant struggle, a single short cry of pain. And then silence.

"Unlike that unfortunate," resumed Jahangir impassively, "you may yet win honor at our behest. Ride with the ameers against Abdul Dost. You have knowledge of the country and the Afghan wiles. Defeat him, and claim greater favors at our all-forgiving hand."

"And if the ungrateful warrior refuses?" put in the vizier swiftly.

"Death of the gods!" The Mogul's slender patience gave way. "Has he not our robe of honor on his poverty-stricken back? Will he choose the cistern of ——, rather than my service?"

Uncomprehending and no little troubled, Khlit stood his ground, trying to grasp what was passing. He had hoped to speak a word to Jahangir for his friend. To aid Abdul Dost he had come to Lahore, and had been gratified by his reception. Now he saw his plans scattered as dust before the wind. He turned to the vizier, whom he thought to be his friend. That shrewd councilor straightway looked at the floor.

"Take the boor hence," cried Jahangir, "and learn his answer. Raja Man Singh, Paluwan Khan, attend me!"

Khlit looked up as the vizier and others approached him.

"I must think," he responded to their inquiries. "Come to my tent, and you will learn what I have decided."

With that he turned and stalked from the chamber. Those who clustered about him hung back, unwilling to leave the important council that was under way, and appreciating the fact that Khlit could not quit the Mogul's camp without being observed by the guards.

So it happened that because of their anxiety to learn what was passing in the hall where the Afghan campaign was being discussed it was some moments before the vizier and others went to the warrior's tent by the posts of the outer guard, never doubting that his decision would be favorable. They judged him by their own standard, and thus were startled as well as genuinely surprized at what they found.

Khlit's tent was empty, his couch and simitar—the gift of Jahangir—lying on the carpet. Both horses were gone, likewise the robe of honor. As to this last they had an inkling from the palace sentinels.

"A warrior in an imperial *khilat* we passed out, verily, for we could not gainsay one of such a rank. A servant followed him, riding unsteadily upon a horse of the royal stable. They drew their reins to the north."

Puzzled, the men of the court searched the vicinity with torches and found the servant, who had been in the pay of the vizier, bound and gagged behind the satin tent.

It was not long before they came to understand the truth—that Khlit had substituted the maimed Chan for his servant, carrying him from the guard tent, saying that he would care for the minstrel's hurt.

"Said the Mongol aught when he bound you?" they demanded of the trembling native.

"Aye, my lords. He said, 'Beware the *tulughma*.'"

CHAPTER VII

WORD TO ABDUL DOST

FAR above the Shyr Pass stood a round hut of woven cypress and pine branches, its entrance overlooking a grassy glade around which the pine forest pressed on three sides. Up the mountain, open tracts of grass were revealed, rising to the region of barren shale rock.

By climbing a giant fir a view could be gained of the whole Shyr Pass, through which the Amu Daria threaded its ribbon-like length.

Beside the river almost directly under the fir—so steep were the sides of the gorge—appeared the trail through the pass, looking for all the world from that height like a yellow ant

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road. And like ants were the moving black specks, coming and going busily along the trail. Sometimes singly, sometimes in groups, they passed under the hut—sometimes the long cavalcade of a caravan was visible.

For many days a girl—she who had put together the hut with her own hands—had climbed the sticky branches of the fir to spend hours in scanning the trail with keen eyes, oblivious of the movements of her cattle, which grazed at will on the upper pastures.

Now she was standing in the hut entrance, nibbling at a round bread-cake and frowning at the mist that drove down from the summits overhead. She was slender and very erect of figure, this Afghán girl, with a ragged woolen coat, plainly designed for a man, about her boyish shoulders.

She braced herself against the *bad-i-purwan*, the Wind of Purwan—the northern wind—that moaned daily through the pass, harbinger of the Autumn season. Behind the hut, like some gigantic field of ripened grain, the pine-trees bent and rocked. Branch rubbed against branch; massive tree-tops lifted, to bend low with a crackling protest the next moment.

Feeling the chill of the blast—for the upper slopes of the Afghan hills, the Koh-i-Baba, were many degrees colder than the valley below where the yellow grain of late Summer was still visible—the solitary maiden rubbed one bare foot tentatively against her leg, drawing the hood of the cloak over her streaming black hair. Her attitude was wary, even defiant. And suddenly she ceased munching the bread, to draw a startled breath.

Within, or rather against, the rush of the wind the note of a high voice reached her ears.

". . . No more I watch at the noble's gate.
For I gaze at the world from the mountain peak—"

The roving glance of the hill girl, keen as it was, failed to discern any human being near by.

"Now the sweet Ghilani saint aid me!" she murmured, dreading the approach of the invisible singer.

Had not tales been told in the hill villages of *ghils* and other terrifying spirits of the heights that rode on the breast of the wind and carried off the souls of men to eternal damnation?

"No vulture I, to hover over carrion.
An eagle I, to strike down my prey!"

At this, a horse burst through the underbrush in front of the hut, and the song halted abruptly as the rider sighted watching girl and hut.

He sat a wearied Arab in curious fashion, and he was weaponless. A very tarnished red velvet cloak was wrapped about his slender shoulders, a fur cap pulled over his ears. His face was dark with cold, and his cheeks hollowed by privation. Chan, despite his lusty singing, had lost somewhat of his debonair manner during a hard journey.

But he swept off his cap with a flourish.

"Allah the generous be thanked," he murmured to himself. "Food, shelter, woman—a fair maid of my own people and one that I have seen before, methinks. Peace be with you!" he greeted her, his eyes dwelling upon her face, which seemed strangely familiar.

"And upon you also be peace," she replied gravely, scanning him with the determined interest of those who must distinguish between friend and foe.

Chan walked the horse to her side, and she noted seriously that the beast was of excellent breed, its saddle costly with silver mountings and cloth-of-gold trappings.

The horse was plainly of better quality than the rider—stolen without doubt, she guessed at once. This somewhat lulled her suspicions, for Chan was undoubtedly an Afghan.

"Who are you?" she demanded, returning to her bread. "What are you doing here? Whither do you ride?"

"One thing at a time, magpie," smiled Chan. "At present I hunger, and for the present I ride no farther than yonder hut. As for my name, have you never heard of Chan of the Hills, the minstrel of the chieftains? Verily it is my ill-fortune to lack my guitar, which was reft from me by certain ill-omened slaves of the World-Gripper. Allah grant that—

"Every fool who made me bow my head,
His head will be bowed by my sword.

"Of course," he meditated, "I lack a sword; yet I have a horse, see you—a notable horse, given me by a thrice exalted warrior. Help me down from my horse."

Chan's smile vanished as he felt of a limp leg that hung useless.

"A mark of the benevolence of the River of Mercy and Fountain of Forgiveness, in other words the Mogul. By the mercy of God was it ordained that my warrior friend should grasp the executioner by the scruff of his dirty neck when he swung simitar to hamstring my other leg. So I can yet stand on one foot, but I can not climb down from this noble steed."

WITH an exclamation the girl helped the youth to a bench in the hut and busied herself with lighting from flint and tinder a fire of brushwood on the flat stones that served for a hearth. Then she offered him milk and began to heat a bowl of rice—after she had unsaddled the Arab and left it to graze.

Food and warmth brightened the eyes of the minstrel.

"*Aie, kichik gul* (Oh, little flower) scarce did

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I think to find a woman of my people so close to the Shyr. What is your name? Why are you alone?"

"I am called Tala-i-Nur. My brother was sent as *jighit* (mounted messenger) to look for our leader some time since and was slain by Alacha—and also was my sister slain. Because of this my father with all of our family joined the Afghan standard."

Curiously Chan looked from the girl to the ill-made hut.

"Then must you love the smell of danger, Tala, for Alacha and his men hold the Shyr beneath us—wherefore came I climbing over the mountain."

"Aye—I have seen."

Chin on hands, the Afghan maid smiled somberly, gazing into the crackling fire. At this Chan was silent, thinking that the girl had chosen her lofty pasturage in order to watch what went on in the pass.

"Verily," he mused, "it is cold and windy here for the *yailak* (the Summer pasture). Perchance you watch other things than cows."

"Who can know what Allah has ordained?"

Suspicion smoldered half-hidden in Tala's dark eyes. An Afghan does not like to be questioned. And the spies of Alacha were thick on the countryside.

"That horse of yours bears the Mogul's brand on its flank."

Chan nodded.

"Aye, little sharp-eyes. Well for me he was the pick of the imperial stables. Never were men so pressed as I and my warrior lord. We rode like the fiends of the wind up the Jhilam bank to the north, where we parted—he for the mountains of the roof of the world, and I for Kabul and the Shyr. I rode at night along goat-path and sheep-track and ate what I could pluck by the way—for dismount I could not."

He grimaced ruefully and glanced up as a patter of rain struck against the felt roof of the hut. Through the many gaps in the woven walls, wind whistled and swept the swirling smoke into Tala's intent face.

"Tell me what goes on in the land," asked the minstrel eagerly. "Where lies Abdul Dost? Has he many followers? Has he seized Balkh and Khanjut?"

The girl seemed not to heed him. She was fingering a bow, stringing it and fitting an arrow to the cord. Presently she glanced at her guest from under the tangle of black hair—dark as a raven's wing, he thought admiringly.

"Would you know what is in my mind?" she questioned.

"Aye."

"You are a spy!"

Springing erect, Tala drew taut the bowstring, leveling the arrow-point at Chan's chest with a steady hand. She breathed deeply, her strong young body rigid with defiance.

"You are the one who tried to slay Abdul Dost. You ride a horse of the World-Gripper. Claiming to be a minstrel, you lack tambour or guitar—and lie about it clumsily. Now you seek to make me talk of the Afghan army."

Chan's mouth opened wide. Then he laughed, a flash of admiration in his brown eyes.

"Clever little magpie! Yet you know the Afghan code. Even a foe is safe under Afghan roof."

"But you are—a spy of the World-Gripper."

The arrow-point drew back to the haft of the bow as the girl deftly pulled bowstring to ear. The boy's eyes did not waver, nor did the smile fade from his lips.

"Tala," he said slowly, "your brother was sent as a messenger—and slain."

"Aye, and my sister also, at the hand of Alacha."

"Yet am I sent as a messenger from my warrior friend to Abdul Dost, your leader. The word I bear means much to the Afghans. Would you slay me?"

"I do not believe you."

"But you must believe."

Chan's smile had vanished. Earnestness shone from his tired face. Stretching forth his crippled leg, he began to unwind the bandages. Stiff with dust and blood, they came off slowly, finally revealing the purple line of a fresh wound behind the knee.

Turning, with an involuntary twitch of agony the boy pulled up his torn cotton trouser, and Tala saw the raw ends of the severed ligaments. Her arms dropped a little and the bowstring slacked.

Chan stared at his crippled limb dumbly. Gone was all the merriment that the boy assumed so bravely, nourishing his own courage thereby.

"I shall never walk as a man again. Ever I must crawl with a crutch. *Ai*—at a word from the Mogul did they this thing. And he called it mercy."

Now a flush overspread the girl's cheeks—a flush that changed swiftly to a nerveless pallor. Arrow and bow fell to her feet. Chan raised his clenched hands toward the roof of the hut.

"I can not walk, Tala. But I can ride—and loose arrow from bow. Aye, I shall sew the arrow-stitch of vengeance. It will heal my wound."

He turned on the girl savagely.

"Think you this is a disguise? Would the wise Alacha, the shrewd fox-like Alacha, choose a cripple for a spy? Ha—think you so?"

TALA'S hands flew to her face and covered her eyes. Tears dripped from between her fingers to the earth that was the only floor of the hut. Then she ran to Chan and fell on her knees.

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"Forgive me!" she cried. "I doubted, but now your words ring true. Oh, it was the poison of Alacha that made me doubt. I deemed you the one that had caused my sister's death."

Uncertainly, for she still wept, Tala cleansed the bandages in fresh water and bound them about Chan's knee, because she had no other linen. As she did so she released long pent-up emotion in swift speech.

"I never doubted you were Chan. Often have I heard you sing under the trees of our orchard in the village before I came here. But Alacha spoke of you, and I believed, because I could not know it was but a trick of the Slayer."

"Alacha—you?" The Afghan youth stared, bewildered.

"Aye. You remember the woman to whom you sang love-songs in the evening, and who listened behind the lattice of her window. The window looking out upon the orchard."

"But she is dead."

"My sister, older than I. Chan, I listened too, for I was envious of your singing, knowing that you had seen the form of my sister who was more fair than I. Aye, Chan, I sat by her knee in the evening after sunset prayers and saw her splendid face grow lovelier at your song. At such times the poison of jealousy was in my heart.

"Then came Alacha, riding by from a hunt. He saw the face of my sister unveiled and seized her, beating me to earth when I struggled to aid her."

Tala, the labor of her dressing finished, sat up, the tears still bright on her cheeks.

"I heard Alacha whisper to his men that here was a means to make the low-born Afghans draw the sword of open revolt. Chan, Alacha had been ordered by the Mogul to stir up the Afghans to rebel—so Badakshan could be despoiled, and the strength of the Afghan tribes scattered to the winds. Seeing that I had heard what was said, the man to whom he spoke would have seized me also, but Alacha stayed him, smiling slowly after his fashion.

" 'Chan, our spy,' he said so that I could hear, 'has shown us a fair flower to be our victim.' "

"But," observed the minstrel, "I did not see you when I rode to the hut that night."

"Nay, I tried to follow the Slayer and his men. I was soon tired and fell by the road. Then I heard that you had carried the body of my sister through Badakshan to arouse the tribes, and so I believed all the more what the Slayer had said. When my father, mourning for my sister, said that you had gone to the Mogul camp I felt in my heart that you were a traitor. But now I see the truth. Forgive me!"

The boy laid his hand on her shoulder, sighing.

"We are but children, Tala, before the craft of the Mogul and his agents. See how he turns Afghan against Afghan. What have I to forgive? So you came here to watch the movements of the Slayer?"

"Aye—and more."

Tala related how when the Afghans took up arms Alacha—who was well prepared—had given up Balkh, but had fallen back on the Shyr Pass, the main road to Kabul and the Mogul's cities. He held Khanjut, the "Iron Gate" of the pass, on the Afghan side, while Abdul Dost assembled his forces in the plains.

"The Mogul musters his army at Lahore, not far from Kabul," mused the boy. "And by the Shyr he will pass his men through the Koh-i-Baba hills, that are the walls of Badakshan. Oh, they are shrewd. How can we oppose such men?"

"By the sword of the tribes." Tala's brown eyes flashed. "And even the women will do their part—even I. Here I can see little, for the mists and the rain veil the movements in the pass below. So I have decided on what I must do. Alacha has an eye—so it is said—for the Afghan women. I will drive my cows by the trails I know to the bed of the pass. The Slayer's men will seize the animals for their food, but I——"

"You will be taken!" cried the boy.

"That is what I plan."

The girl's serious brow was stern with purpose. Her eyes fell, but she nodded bravely.

"I have heard that Alacha keeps the fairest women for himself. Thus shall I see what goes on in his camp and hear something of his plans—for I am quick of ear."

The boy's face fell; then he laughed—checking himself swiftly, as he put his hand on the tangle of her hair.

"O little flower, I am very wise. I have journeyed among the camps of the world—and seen Alacha and the Mogul. Such men as they, Tala, have eyes solely for the elegant women of Persia and Hindustan. The Slayer scarce would notice you in your rags——"

"Am I not fair?" She gazed at him wide-eyed, questioning. "Alas, Alacha had eyes for my sister! And, somewhat, I resemble her."

At this Chan gazed at the girl keenly.

"True, Tala. You are very like her. Yet we Afghans are not spies——"

"And, therefore, are blind to the tricks of our foes." Tala rose with a nod, bravely determined. "I shall go to the camp of Alacha and watch, and if any one tries to harm me I shall shoot him with my bow."

Chan shook his head moodily. Then his eyes brightened.

"So be it, Tala. If you could learn aught to aid Abdul Dost—" He smiled, merry again. "And I will join you, after I have delivered my message. "I will come to seek you at the Shyr bank, behind the Iron Gate, wearing some old

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garments of the holy man, Muhammad Asad."

"Alacha would slay you."

"Nay, for I will be a begging *kwajah*, lame, for all to see."

He caught the girl's slim wrist fiercely.

"O Tala, you and I will contrive a mighty thing. We will be a thorn in the side of the World-Gripper! For we will sow the seeds of fear."

While the Afghan maid listened, wondering, Chan told her the message that he bore to Abdul Dost—that the old warrior who had befriended him was bringing aid to Abdul Dost. That a horde of wild riders would come to Badakshan from the north, through the mountain passes.

"Such men as you and I have never seen, O Tala. They live for fighting alone, and they ride like the demons of the air. They wear the hides of beasts for armor, and their bodies are like iron."

"Who are they?" Tala was amazed.

"The Tatar Horde. They, like the Afghans, are the children of Genghis Khan. Eh, little flower, we will spread fear in the camp of our enemy. We will foretell the coming of the spirits of the dead warriors, of whom the Mogul's bards sing."

His eyes were smoldering as if with fev .

"Thus will I knit the arrow-stitch of vengeance. Once before the Tatar Horde swept through the Caliphate and Samarkand crumbled like a house of dust before them, and Balkh and Lahore. Ameers and sultans were cut down like ripe grain. So, we wil sing, you and I——"

Chan laughed, clutching her slender shoulders.

"We will sing a chant of doom—of doom from the mountains. We will say that the *ghils* are a-horse, and the dead walk again. The Mogul's men live by omens. Eh—we will give them an omen, a mighty omen. They will hear the trumpets of the Conqueror Genghis Kahn."

He leaned back against the wall, his small body exhausted.

"Now I will sleep."

So Tala cast wood upon the fire and dragged her blankets close to the stone hearth, and made Chan comfortable thereon. She sat close to him, watching until he slept.

But she did not sleep. From time to time she replenished the fire, gazing into its glow and turning over in her mind the strange things the minstrel had said.

And in this manner did a boy and girl plan to match their wits against the intrigue of a master plotter.

IN THE early morning they parted, Tala assembling her herd and driving it down to the valley, while Chan turned his horse's head toward Badakshan and the Afghan camp.

Before sunset the tidings he brought were repeated to Abdul Dost, where the chief of the Afghans had planted his standard in the plain.

"Do not give battle with your full strength until I join you. With my men, I will reach Badakshan from the northern passes before snow closes the valleys."

That was the message from Khlit. On hearing it Abdul-Dost flushed with pleasure and uttered a broad oath, saying to the blind Muhammad Asad, who sat near him, that they would have the aid of the old warrior whose wisdom was worth more than two thousand words.

The mullah nodded gravely.

"Verily does it seem that the aid of this warrior could not be bought with gold. It is in my mind that he has felt the tie of friendship, and that he keeps faith with you. Yet what tribes are these of the north and how may they come hither?"

Neither Muhammad Asad nor Abdul Dost had seen the Mongol clans. Between the Afghan valleys and Mongolia rose the mountain barrier of the Himalayas. No merchants went to the steppe. Only some legends and tales of travelers had reached their ears.

What manner of men were these from the steppe? They did not know.

"And how," asked a warrior, "are they to surmount the barrier of the hills? Can an army pass over the roof of the world? Nay—it may not be."

Abdul Dost realized the force of this.

"We are in the hand of God," he repeated gravely. "We will wait."

His men, villagers, shepherds, hunters, clansmen, were impatient for action. Afghans, Hazaras, Kirghiz, had assembled to fight for their liberty. From the distant tribes of Ferghana and from the desert itself they had come. Old men and former soldiers, boys and priests, had cheerfully taken up the burden of war.

The boy who had been the ward of blind Muhammad Asad rode proudly at the left hand of the *mansabdar*. Hope was rife in Badakshan—the reckless exuberance of the Afghan who never reckons the strength of a foe.

Meanwhile in the Shyr Pass Alacha sat in his red tent, hearing the messages of his spies, drilling his men, plundering cattle and grain. And in Kabul the high ameers of the World-Gripper mobilized the imperial army. Rajeh Man Singh and Paluwan Khan planned the coming campaign. The Lord Thunder-Thrower cast more shot for his camel artillery. The matchlock-men furbished their weapons under the eye of a Portuguese captain of mercenaries.

The imperial army, the *corps d'armée* of the Mogul, formed itself slowly into a gigantic, machine-like whole. Levies of horsemen from the northern provinces trotted in daily, the warriors resplendent in silver armlets, silk and

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cloth-of-silver and precious jewels sewn into turban and tunic—bearing upon their backs more often than not the whole of a year's pay while their families in the villages hungered.

Camp-followers, bazaar-merchants, armorers, courtezans, flocked to Kabul until a veritable city of tents arose in the valley by the winding river.

Then came the day when Jahangir placed robes of honor on Raja Man Singh, Paluwan Khan and the ameers of his host; the *alam*, the imperial standard, was raised, the kettledrums sounded, and the long camel-trains began to move forward to the northern pass attended by the advance guard of Rajput cavalry. From the balcony of his palace the World-Gripper watched the dust that rose over the moving host.

"See that an accounting is made to me," he observed idly to the vizier who stood by him. "An accounting of the spoil taken from the Afghans. It will add in my memoirs to the glory of my reign."

CHAPTER VIII

By the waters of Kerulon, by the hills of Khantai Khan, in the heart of the ocean of grass, a palace is.

Above the waters of the sacred river, under the breasts of the mountain, there is the court of a monarch.

The eyes of a warrior host turn toward the lord of souls. Yet he moves not and the standard over his head stirs not. For the palace is a tomb, and the standard is dust. And no man may see the warrior host that lies at the feet of Genghis Khan.

Yet in the hearts of men still lives the fear that was fear of Genghis Khan.

IN THE annals of the Mongol khans it is written that the Horde journeyed south and west from their homeland by the Kerulon and the basin of Jungaria in the Autumn of a year early in the seventeenth century, and this was to escape the Winter cold that was creeping down from Lake Baikal, as well as the inroads of the Chinese.

For the khans and their people lived not in cities. Their *yurts*, great felt tents, moved over the mid-Asian steppe drawn by bullocks, and with the *yurts* moved the herds that were the remaining wealth of the Mongols.

They roved restlessly, seldom dismounting from their shaggy ponies, passing aimlessly over the vast spaces, ringed by distant snow ranges that lay just to the north of the Himalayas.

The clans of Mongolia were thinned in numbers; their glory was a thing of the past, recited in song by the minstrels, brooded over beside the fires at night. They wore the sheepskin and leather taken from the animals slain for food. Their weapons were antiquated, being fashioned for the hunt—bows, and short swords.

Powerful, slow-thinking men, warriors and herders, the khans ate what they might, drank deep of mare's milk and slept much, listening at times to the songs of the minstrels.

So Khlit found them by the lakes north of the Thian Shan.

"It is well," they said. "He who was our Kha Khan has come to us to sleep in our tents and eat of our food."

Word passed swiftly along the invisible channels of the steppe that the Cossack in whose veins ran Tatar blood, and who—himself a descendant of their royal chiefs—had once been their leader, had returned to them out of the mysterious splendor of Ind beyond the mountains to the south.

"He has come in the twilight of old age," they said. "It is well. For the steppe which is our home is his also."

And then swiftly the messages changed. The gray-haired chiefs of the *kurultai*, the council, assembled and spoke together.

"The warrior who was Kha Khan has followed the path of battle in the land of Ind," they repeated gravely. "He has come with a word for our hearing."

Hunters who were following the gazelles and wild horses of the plains began to drift back to the *yurts*, hearing the rumor. Khans, seeking Winter quarters for their clans, rode to the *kibitka* where Khlit sat.

"There is war beyond the mountains to the south and west," they said next. "A people of our race live in a valley there—the valley of Badakshan."

Then also riders passed from the lakes to the outlying hordes as the Tatars still called their tribes, although now but a shadow of the numbers that had overrun China, the Himalayas, Iran, Persia, and the Caucasus.

"The Kirghiz and the Afghans, who are like to us, ask aid," they remarked to each other. "They are the children of Timurlane, the Lame Conqueror, who is of the line of Genghis Khan."

"The army of Ind rides to the hills," replied shrewder ones, "and there is the wealth of a kingdom in the camp of the Mogul's men. Aye, there is gold and weapons—horses, jewels and cattle."

Under the magic stimulus of war the men of the hordes gathered about the lakes. Once assembled, they sought Khlit out. The elder men of the Jun-gar brooded silently. And Khlit addressed his old friends of the *kurultai*.

"To the south," he said, "lies a road that the khans have not followed for the space of eight times the life of a man. In the time of Genghis Khan the road led to the Caliphate; now it leads to Ind."

Bearded heads bent attentively to catch his words; slant eyes peered at him immobilely from under tufted brows. Massive, scarred hands clutched spear-shafts as the Tatar chieftains leaned on their spears to listen.

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"At the end of the road danger awaits the rider," went on Khlit's deep voice. "I have been your leader. Brothers, khans, you know I speak not idle words—" his glance roved from face to face—"nor make a promise that may not be kept. I have made a pledge that I will bring aid to a warrior, my brother-in-arms, Khan of Badakshan."

"Aye." The fur-capped head of youthful Berang, khan of the Torgot clan nodded. "O Khlit, we know."

"Then hear my message. Before this I have said that I would lead those who dare follow against Jahangir, the World-Gripper, the Mogul. Now I say, brothers, khans, that of those who follow me few will return."

Silence greeted this, and the hard eyes did not falter.

"Well said, by the blood of the horse of Natagai!" bellowed a lion-like voice—Chagan, the sword-bearer, a man thick-set as a gnarled oak, powerful enough to break the neck of a yak by a twist of his hands. "That is no lie. Good!"

Khlit lifted his hand.

"Spoil there may be—spoil from the tents of the Chatagais.* Yet those who are slain may bear away no gold. I want no riders to follow me who think of naught but plunder."

"Aye," said the khans. "In flashing sword-strokes does a warrior find honor."

"If there be a battle—and a battle I seek—those who follow me must face the tramp of elephants and the thunder of cannon. I want no cowards."

The khans growled at this, clutching their weapons the tighter. One grumbled that Genghis had overmastered the "moving castles," the elephants, when he vanquished the Emperor of Han.

"And among those who come with me there will be no leaders. I will lead, and he who disobeys will die. At my side will be the yak-tail standard, as when we drove the Chinese banners before us at the Kerulon."

"Ho!" cried one. "That was a battle. The minstrels will sing of that."

"But not of this," broke in Khlit harshly. "For we will be in a strange, southern land, and the bards of Ind will not remember the bravery of the Tatar khans. Nay, we will have naught but hard blows and hard words, for we go to the aid of an oppressed people. Nor—" he faced them gravely—"do I seek the leadership save that one man must be chief and not many. And I know how we may strike the Mogul."

His aged countenance lighted up at this, and his keen eyes gleamed.

"Ha, lords! We be old, many of us, and our race is passing into the shadows. Come, shall we strike one good blow with the sword—" his curved sword flashed in his hand at this—"of Genghis, the Conqueror! Shall we ride into battle once more? Has our blood grown too thin to shed?"

The somber faces shone, and the intent eyes held his fiercely.

"Tomorrow at day-break—" Khlit sheathed his weapon and folded his arms across his broad chest—"I ride to the south. Those who will go with me must be mounted and assembled at the council-place by then."

Such was his last address to the Tatar khans.

THAT night beside the camp-fires that sprinkled the plain and flickered into the lakes the men of the Horde sat in unwonted talk. Here and there the one-stringed fiddle of a minstrel strummed and a deep voice recited an endless chant of former glory. And with this rose the plaint of the women—the sound of mourning that has since the world was new attended the departure of the warriors.

And with the dawn, when the fires had sunk to embers, there was a stirring of figures, the soft tread of horses, and the clink of weapons.

The first glow of scarlet sunrise over the steppe showed a multitude of riders gathered around the tent of Khlit.

Truly it was a strange army. For there was no baggage save the saddle-bags on the spare horses—each Tatar brought an extra mount. Nor was any ammunition-train to be seen. Each warrior carried his own weapons.

There was no muster, no fretting of waiting ranks. The riders of the clans grouped about their respective banners, and the whole hive-like mass centered around the yak-tail standard.

This was outlined clearly against the yellow of the flooding sky. It moved forward, and helmeted heads and spear-points followed swiftly. Once a woman burst from a tent to run, weeping, beside the horse of a young warrior, who thrust her aside with his foot.

Again rose the song of the minstrels, harsh and discordant in the semi-darkness. Groups of old women, straining aged eyes, clutched the young ones to them in silence.

"*Hai*—the Horde is onward bound . . . the khans of Tatary ride . . . they follow the standard of Genghis . . . Wo to those who stand in their way . . ."

It was the chant of the riders, remembered from ancient times. And, in the half-light of dawn, the black mass of riders under the banners seemed not otherwise than the mass of the ancient Horde.

CHAPTER IX

ALACHA HUNTS

TALA sat watchfully upon the broad rump of a buffalo, the last of her herd. While the beast drank from a pool in one of the icy mountain streams the girl eyed the surrounding

* The Mogul race of India.

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thicket thoughtfully. She had drawn a fold of her heavy cloak across the lower portion of her face, and only her alert eyes were visible, under a dark tangle of hair.

The echo of a distant shout pierced the quiet of the glade. Overhead the echo reverberated from lofty sandstone cliffs, winding in and out among narrow rock-ravines, and returning unexpectedly from the face of some distant mountain. The buffalo raised its dripping muzzle inquiringly, but Tala made no move to pull its nose-cord away from the stream.

She listened keenly as the voices of men approached through a willow thicket along the bank of the stream. Then horses' hoofs were heard, trampling on stones. Tala sat upright, her small figure tense. She had been waiting for the coming of the riders.

And presently, as she had anticipated, a brilliant cortège trotted through the willows, led by two noblemen. She recognized the silks and velvets of Alacha and the russet-and-green overtunic of Paluwan Khan—the Northern Lord. On the gloved wrist of the Slayer rested his favorite gerfalcon, hooded.

In contrast to the light hunting-garb of the handsome, olive-skinned Turkoman, the khan rode fully armed in *khud*—steel headdress—and *zirih* beneath his tunic, with mace and sword at his girdle. Paluwan Khan was a dark-browed stoop-shouldered man, and more than a little bow-legged.

Tala faced them defiantly, only drawing the cloak closer under her eyes.

"An Afghan, by the soul of Ali!" cried Paluwan Khan, scowling.

"And not ill-shaped," added Alacha, fingering his mustache.

"No place this, for a brat of the ill-omened brood," grunted the khan.

"After all," murmured Alacha, his slant eyes straying idly back to his falcon, from the girl, "she is dirty, and rags distort even the finest limbs. Ho, little thief, what do you here? What seek you in the hunting-ground of the Mogul?"

Tala's eyes blazed.

"This land was my father's field," she cried. "And you, O Alacha, are a greater thief than I, for your men have taken my cattle, leaving only this buffalo that is sick and like to die."

"Then is your father a traitor, wench," said Alacha in a colorless voice. Unlike the khan, he seemed to enjoy the hot words of the girl. "For he is with the black standard of rebellious Abdul Dost."

Under his gaze, curiously thoughtful, as if the aspect of the woman called up a familiar thought, Tala turned her head aside.

"Am I not to be paid for the cattle?" she asked passively.

Paluwan Khan laughed in his beard and would have spurred on, but Alacha turned cold eyes from Tala to the foremost of his retinue, a gigantic Turk, Hossein by name.

"Hossein, offspring of sin," he observed, twisting the end of his light mustache delicately, "your race is covetous of the women of other lands. Let me see, I have given you Georgian, Circassian, Khorassani and Khirghiz, but never—before this—an Afghan. Would yonder sharp-tongued baggage please you?"

"Aye, my lord," bellowed the stout warrior. "There is no bounty like my lord's."

He was clad in the barbaric splendor that was then the fashion in Constantinople. A blue *kaftan*, fur-tipped, enveloped his massive shoulders, over a white robe embroidered with cloth-of-gold, somewhat soiled. Hossein had wrestled in the courts of the Osmanli, and his garb mimicked the splendor of the sultans, just as the jewels on his black paws imitated the Greek fashion, and also the chain of turquoise about his bull neck.

"Aye, fountain of imperial mercy," he salaamed, small eyes glittering. "If her tongue be too sharp for my taste, a knife will blunt it——"

Tala thrust out a contemptuous lower lip.

"Is this the justice of Alacha?"

Neither of the nobles deigned to reply. Hossein advanced on Tala, seizing the nose-cord of the buffalo. Alacha looked on, much amused.

The Slayer was something of a philosopher, having passed his boyhood as disciple in a *meddresse* of Samarkand, and wandering from there to Bokhara and its mosques, to idolatrous Antioch and cosmopolitan Constantinople. Nominally a Mohammedan, he was familiar with the doctrines of Shiite and Sunnite, Zoroastrian and Hebrew, and the *shamans* of Mongolia. Thus he had the intelligence and capacity for evil of the mosque-raised boy and the ready wits of a wanderer.

He could quote readily from the Persian poets, the astronomy of Uleg Beg or the hero epic of the *ramayana*. Supremely intelligent, he allowed others to do his fighting for him, and his quarreling. In great favor with the petulant Jahangir, he was skilled in anticipating the moods of his monarch.

Some said that the cruelty of the slender Turkoman was not natural to him, being assumed to satisfy Jahangir; others that by cruelty he hoped to make his name feared, being loath to hazard his person in battle to that end.

Now he glanced up, his smooth face revealing as much surprize as it was capable of showing. A broad, bent figure clad in heavy sheepskins had approached Hossein silently and laid a massive hand on the Turk's shoulder.

"By the gods!" murmured Alacha.

He stared at the companion of the newcomer, a veiled woman mounted on a white Arab.

"Stand aside," said, or rather growled, the man of the sheepskins.

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Hossein gaped and stepped back to shake off the hand that gripped him. Failing in this, he reached for a knife in his girdle.

"Unmannered dog!" he shouted. "Child of a dog—"

His heavy voice waxed shrill with anger. He had noticed the brown, curling hair and the blue eyes of the man who faced him—a Circassian.

Between Turk and Circassian there was a world-old feud. The stranger folded his arms, his eyes hard. Upon shoulder and swelling forearm the leather garments clung tightly, molded over iron-like muscles. He did not move to touch the short, bare sword thrust through his belt.

Alacha, who was a keen observer, noted that the sheepskins of the powerful stranger seemed ill in keeping with the splendid workmanship of the sword. And he fancied that the woman, although wearing the heavy wool of a commoner, bore herself too well on the blooded horse to be a person of the countryside. Her veil and the pearl chaplet bound over her dark hair were of Persian design.

Paluwan Khan, impatient at the second interruption, commanded Hossein to knock the stranger down, seize the girl and continue on with the hunt, in the name of Allah's mercy.

"Nay," cried the woman on the horse, "he is my man—" nodding at the broad figure in sheepskins—"and he will take the Afghan woman for me."

ALACHA toyed with the silver chain of his hawk and frowned, puzzled by the imperious voice of the woman and the boldness of her servant.

"Hossein," he purred, "are you minded to give place to a boor, a shepherd clown?"

His glance still dwelt on the veiled stranger, noting the stately figure and the wealth of dark hair. Why did such a one ride alone, except for a single slave? Who was she? What did she want of the Afghan child?

Paluwan Khan spurred to his side.

"In the name of Satan and all his brood, why barter words with a woman? They profit a man nothing, and they sting like serpents."

Alacha waved him aside. Surely the newcomer was beautiful. Probably, since she was alone, she was masterless. If he could know for certain that she was not wife or mistress of some noble more powerful than himself——

"O khanum—" he bent his handsome head slightly—"have you a claim to this wretched girl, that you countermand the word of Alacha?"

"I desire her." The woman seemed to be smiling behind her veil. "And I have been listening, my lord, behind yonder thicket to—the words of Alacha."

"Ah."

The Turkoman bit his carefully tended mustache reflectively. The woman had wit. Likewise—so he assured himself—there must be a purpose behind her speech. If he only knew—

"Khanum, it is never my wish to forego the desire of beauty. You have a sturdy scoundrel to attend you—eh, he is not lacking in boldness. Then let him try his strength with the wrestler, Hossein. Let the Afghan maiden be the prize."

He expected a protest, perhaps the disclosure of her name and rank. And by soft words he hoped to win her favor.

"So be it," she said after a pause. "Geron is no weakling."

At this the Circassian silently discarded coat and belt and stood forth in leather jerkin and woolen trousers. Hossein after a glance at his master did likewise, baring hairy shoulders and arms, massive and full-fleshed.

"Ho, Circassian dog," he bellowed, "I will make kohl for your blue eyes out of the dust. Nay—I will redden your pale cheeks with blood."

Geron glanced at him impassively. He stood not as tall as the Turk, but he was broader across the shoulders and chest. Moreover his arms were of gorilla-like length, and his legs—unlike Hossein's—were heavily thewed.

"Is your man skilled as a wrestler, khanum?" growled Paluwan Khan, becoming interested. He had pressed forward, to form a ring about the two champions, with others of the hunting-party.

"If not, his bones will crack like twigs, and I shall take that bright sword of his, for it likes me well."

"He is no wrestler," observed the woman. "*Ai*——"

Hossein with professional shrewdness had suddenly gripped Geron about the shoulders, his plump arms twining for a headlock. The Circassian, taken by surprize, twisted about and broke free with some trouble. He stood erect, breathing deeply, and then gasped wholeheartedly. The Turk, angered by the failure of his first hold, butted him full in the stomach.

"Is your man a wrestler?" asked the woman quickly. "I think he is a ram."

She broke off as Geron was heavily thrown by a more successful trick of the Turk. The breath seemed to have been knocked from his stout body by this second impact, yet when Hossein would have fallen upon him with a cry of triumph he wriggled aside and stood erect, glaring at his tormentor.

Squealing with self-inspired rage, Hossein rushed at him head down. Again they grappled, and the two powerful bodies swayed and staggered over the turf. Alacha barely glanced at them. He was sure of the outcome, and he was more interested in the woman who took delight in a man's sport.

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The Turk, feinting craftily, jerked Geron's knees from under him and pounced upon his sweating shoulders, driving home the head-hold he sought—his forearm locked under the chin of his adversary, his weight full on Geron's neck.

"Now the twig will snap, *crack*—like that!" Paluwan Khan grinned, and snapped his fingers

The woman clapped her hands.

"Geron!" she cried. "Make an end."

But the Circassian's broad face was purple, and he gasped. Be a man ever so strong, he can not put forth his strength without wind in his lungs. Hossein was silent now, striving wickedly to break the neck of his foe. The wrestling-match had become a deadly struggle.

Tala sat her buffalo, scrutinizing combatants and spectators with sharp interest. Such sport was in her mind the play of slaves. Men of her race fought with sharp sword-edges. Although she might well have done so, she made no effort to run off.

She had noted every detail of the appearance of the woman on the horse. But chiefly she watched the Slayer.

The two wrestlers had sunk to the ground, Geron underneath. The friends of Hossein had raised a triumphant shout. This seemed to act as the spur the great Circassian needed, for a brown arm shot out from the writhing mass and closed about the throat of the Turk.

The watchers saw Hossein thrust back and his grip broken as easily as a severed vine is pulled from a tree-trunk. The muscles of Geron's arm swelled and cracked as he rose slowly to his knees, gulping deep breaths of air into a laboring chest.

Out of red eyes, under sweat-dripping brows, he stared at the struggling Hossein. The Turk, by a crafty twist, jerked free, blood spurting from his throat and mouth as he did so. Then Geron, still kneeling, caught him sidewise by the waist and rose with his burden to his feet.

Gripping the Turk fast on his shoulder, Geron stared about him and stepped to the edge of the pool. His hands shifted from waist to the neck of Hossein and his broad shoulders heaved.

Hossein, the skilled wrestler, flew through the air and fell, a good four paces away, into the pool near the watching Tala. The water was shallow, yet Hossein lay passive beneath it, stunned.

"Let him lie," said Alacha softly. "I have no service for a weakling."

But Geron paced forward a trifle unsteadily stooped and drew the unconscious body from the water. Without looking at it he walked to his sheepskin coat and belt, girded on his sword and seized the nose-cord of Tala's buffalo. Then he spoke to Paluwan Khan.

"This blade—" he smote the haft of his short weapon—"was fashioned for my hand, not for yours, my lord."

The noble shrugged his shoulders and would have urged Alacha forward on the hunt, but the Slayer had been whispering to the woman.

"In the name of all the gods, who is your champion? He handled Hossein like a sack of grain."

"My lord," she laughed, "he is no miller but a maker of swords. He is Geron, the armorer of the Mogul."

Alacha stared at the man who for half a generation had tempered and shaped the Damascus and Persian blades for Jahangir.

"The imperial favor would shine upon us coldly," swore Paluwan Khan in his ear, "if your stupid wrestler had broken the neck of the great smith. Said I not a woman was a breeder of trouble——"

"But such a woman," whispered Alacha. "Half the spoils of Afghanistan for a sight of her face."

To the stranger he added:

"The Afghan girl is yours; verily your wrestler is a worthy servant indeed. Yet for you a champion of nobler blood should be supplied. Will you lighten my eyes with gladness by allowing me to escort you to the camp? Perhaps if you have no tent, or await some one from the court——"

"I wait for no one, Alacha," she responded. "But I will ride with you to your tent."

Whereupon, preceded by Geron and Tala on her buffalo, the woman and Alacha turned back along the stream toward the camp of the Mogul's army.

WITHIN the inner recess of Alacha's tent the woman of the pearls seated herself upon the cushions of the Slayer; yet when he would have knelt upon the rug in front of her she checked him with an imperious gesture.

"It is not fitting you should sit," she explained, adding softly, "You know not my rank."

This indeed was causing Alacha no little worry. He frowned, for he fancied that his visitor was making game of him. If he could but know her name, and her purpose in seeking him——

Smilingly he offered his visitor dainty refreshment of sherbet, ice-cooled, and figs in syrup. These, however, the woman commanded to be taken to Tala in the entrance compartment of the tent, with more substantial fare for Geron.

Alacha's smooth brow flushed darkly at this affront to his hospitality. He fumbled with the jewels at his throat, trying to meet the glance of the dark-eyed beauty who was tranquilly scrutinizing the splendid coloring of a peacock—one of the Slayer's pets.

"Now, my lord," she observed at length, "I wish you to tell me how the campaign goes—

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how you and the pillars of empire have fared against the Afghan."

Politely, slightly ironically, he bowed.

"To do that, my lady, I must first know your name."

"Then—" the brown eyes flashed at him mockingly over the veil—"I must needs tell you. The whole of the Mogul's army has passed through the Shyr into Badakshan; you have burned to the ground a score of villages, and planted as many head men upon stakes. Balkh you have seized, and levied tribute of half their wealth upon its merchants. Slaves you have taken——"

"From the thieving Pathans."

"Who must become the servants of Jahangir. Was it wise? My lord Alacha, you have advanced the imperial army over half Badakshan, destroying the crops, fruits and vineyards that you have not stripped for yourself——"

"Khanum, we have driven the Afghans before us."

"Verily? You have not engaged them in battle."

"Nay, they fly before the imperial standard. True, they harrass our foraging parties and our supply caravans. They be born brigands——"

"Who love their freedom."

Alacha's full lip curled. Was the woman seeking to play upon him? She wore the headdress and veil of a married woman, yet she rose alone near the army. She had befriended an Afghan girl. Wherefore?

"Your words are a well of wisdom, khanum," he parried. "Perchance also your wisdom has found a part for the hill maiden to play."

His visitor nodded gravely.

"Aye, my lord. I shall send her to Abdul Dost with a message."

The Turkoman laughed. If this were intrigue it was poorly concealed. He became more bold, for he fancied the woman sought to win his favor. That she should be a friend of the Afghans he doubted. The men of the hills had no wits in their empty skulls.

"It is written that the fairest of women unite the pearls of wisdom to the diamond of beauty," he smiled, approaching her. "Happy is the hour when such a companion comes to my tent——"

"Have you not bound the girdle of fidelity to your master, the Mogul, about the cloak of war?" she asked calmly. "Alacha, I have seen the manner in which you serve your lord. No eyes have you for aught save the women you may take, or the spoil you may pile beside your tent."

The Turkoman shrugged his shoulders, staring curiously at the woman who treated him as a servant.

"Alacha," she continued thoughtfully, "I also serve the Mogul, and he trusts me above his generals. Wherefore I say to offer Abdul Dost fair terms. Let the Afghan make peace in honor. Offer amends for the pillaging done by your men. Send the girl Tala with the message."

"Amends—to the Afghan? When we have the imperial army mustered for battle? What would Jahangir say?"

He laughed tolerantly. It pleased him to match words with his fair visitor.

The brown eyes fell serious at once, and she spoke with masculine directness.

"Alacha, you and the other ameers think much of the glory that may be won in a battle. Yet are we all servants of—India, and the Mogul of India." Her voice quickened and she sat erect. "Where have your spies been? Have you no tidings of aid coming to Adbul Dost from the northern tribes?"

"Aye—some talk there has been among the mountain men of Mongol clans gathering beyond the hills. But naught have I heard from the priest who is my spy among the Mongols."

"Talk! If you meet these same clans in battle the imperial army will feel the weight of a skilled sword. Grant them peace and you may win strong allies—Afghans and Mongols. Then will the empire of India wax greater thereby."

Alacha smiled, adjusting the folds of his elaborate cloak.

"The clans will never win through the passes of the roof of the world, my lady. Verily, this is a matter for the wisdom of men, not for a woman's tongue. Will you not rest——"

"Nay. Alacha, once I came through the passes of the northern hills from the desert and the city of the black priests—Khoten. For guide I had a warrior of the Mongol clans. Now he has gone back to his people."

"Can horsemen ride over the rock-passes? Can horses find feed in the snow? Nay, have no fear——"

He sought to touch her hand.

"Fool!"

The woman rose swiftly. From under her veil she drew a long string of pearls, unwound from about her throat.

"You have an eye for spoil. Know you these royal jewels? Know you their owner?"

Alacha's olive face paled and his lips quivered. He stepped back, raising both hands to his forehead. For he had looked into the gateway of death, and his usually placid nerves failed him momentarily.

"Nur-Jahan!" he cried "Light of the World, queen-to-be of Jahangir! Pardon. How was I to know? *Kulluh*—I am your slave."

With a quick thought he drew his dagger and held its hilt toward her. "Slay me if I have displeased——"

She waved him back impatiently, smiling under her veil at the transparent attempt at heroics. Adjusting the splendid pearls once more about her throat, she made a sign for quiet.

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"Jahangir knows not I have left the court. When I heard the news from Mongolia I hastened hither, for those at the court had no thought for the coming of the clans. Only Geron knows, and he is my faithful slave, for he came from my home in Persia."

Her voice softened at this, and Alacha breathed a sigh of relief. Nur-Jahan was unlike the women of India. Once a wanderer, daughter of a poor caravan-follower, her beauty and splendid intellect had made a name for her at the court of Akbar, father of Jahangir.

Her former husband, Sher Afghan, the Tiger Lord, had been slain by Jahangir's order—almost the first act of the young Mogul's reign. Nur-Jahan, formerly called Mir-un-nissa, alone of those at the court of Delhi was unafraid of Jahangir—had even received his wooing coldly.

Sorrow and the vicissitudes of life had left their stamp on the woman's soul, although her fairness seemed to have grown the greater for suffering. Her courage in holding up the mirror of truth to the eyes of the narrow-minded and short-tempered monarch had increased her influence over him. Fearless, prone to follow her own path, her wisdom overmatched the wits of the statesmen of the court.

Nur-Jahan was destined to be the greatest empress of India. And the love of the Mogul for her was the brightest spot in a dissolute life. Although the Taj Mahal was built as the tomb of another woman, Nur-Jahan, the Persian, was the fairest figure of the Mogul era.

And it was this love, headstrong and jealous, of Jahangir for the Persian that Alacha had feared.

"Tomorrow," said Nur-Jahan, "we will send the girl with the message to Adbul Dost. Oh, Alacha, much have I risked in coming hither. The Mogul has greater foes near his side than the Afghans. He must not suffer a defeat on this border of his kingdom. Nay, now is the time for peace."

With that she withdrew to a small tent on the outskirts of the camp that Geron had set up, and with her went Tala.

And the great Persian out of kindness to the maid gave her fresh garments of the Afghan fashion to replace her rags and ordered her to sleep at the foot of her own couch.

Now when the cry of the *namaz gar*, the evening prayer, went up and the manifold activity of the camp was stilled while ten thousand Moslems knelt in worship, Nur-Jahan crouched by the carpet that was her bed and prayed.

And when she ceased she heard without the tent the curious song of a minstrel to his love, low-toned and musical. Yet when she and Geron looked from the tent canopy they saw only a slender beggar, wearing holy garments, sitting beneath the wide limbs of a plane-tree, and looking up tranquilly into the evening sky.

ALACHA did not pray. He sat on the cushions where the fragrance of the attar of rose—Nur-Jahan's favorite perfume—still clung faintly, and in his soul was the poison of a temptation that twined into his thoughts and would not be dismissed.

"Jahangir knows not she has come hither," he repeated under his breath.

He rested his handsome head on clenched hands, feeling again the fear that had gripped him when he thought of the Mogul.

"By the gods—whoever they be—she is fair. For a glimpse of her face I would hazard—much."

And his new longing drove out the fear. His mind had ever dwelt on women. And Nur-Jahan, whose beauty pierced the veil that concealed it, had been in his tent, at his side.

"Aye, the Persian has risked much," he communed with his thoughts. "Verily she has hazarded the favor of Jahangir to ride hither. Why? She came to me. Perchance she does not dislike me——"

Isolated from the court, monarch of a kingdom, Alacha had fed upon his own vanity. He had fashioned a shallow heaven out of his own desires.

"She seeks mercy for the Afghans—unknown to the Mogul. Is she the empress of the age, or—fool?"

While the shadows deepened in the tent he sat in meditation. Impatiently he ordered away attendants who would have brought candles and the evening meal. He glanced from time to time across the space between the tents to where the silk curtains of Nur-Jahan's shelter glowed, shaking slightly in the cool, evening breeze.

"Geron knows."

He rose to pace the carpets of his pavilion restlessly. Once he glanced up at the distant peaks of the Himalayas where the snow summits loomed chilly roseate with the after-glow of the sun, and thought amusedly that Nur-Jahan had come to the camp to make peace with Abdul Dost because she feared an army of horsemen might cross a half-thousand miles of those ravines.

This reflection encouraged him in a subtle fashion. No one would credit the warning of the Persian. That was well. If the campaign were ended at this stage there would be scant triumph for Alacha.

So it must not be ended.

He nodded to himself slowly, then started with a hissing breath of alarm as a dark figure crawled to his feet. It was a great, silent form, like an animal's.

"Mercy, lord. Do not turn the warmth of your favor from Hossein!"

The wrestler, stripped of his finery, with tattered tunic and baggy trousers water-soaked, rose to his knees. Light from a torch at the

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gate of the *khanate*—the strip of heavy calico, upon bamboo poles that encircled the tent—shone upon his white eyeballs rolling in a blood-stained face.

"Lord of the northern world, monarch of the stars," he chattered, his teeth unruly with the cold, "your slaves say that you cursed me because the Circassian dog tricked me. But I——"

"You would like revenge upon Ger—upon the blue-eyed Circassian?" observed Alacha thoughtfully.

"My lord, it is my prayer——"

"Come then."

The Turkoman moved toward the gate of the *khanate*. Hossein followed, happy that Alacha had not struck him or sent him away. A defeated wrestler, cast off by his master, Hossein's fortunes would have sunk to the dust, and the prospect of further largess and slaves been as naught.

At the gate Alacha dismissed the spearman who stood guard, and commanded the torch to be borne away. Leaning against the post of the barrier, he gazed silently over the encampment. An arrow's shot away glimmered the tent of Nur-Jahan in the shadows under the grove of plane-trees.

The smoke of a thousand cooking-fires was dwindling into the cold air of evening, and the sky overhead, shot with the brilliance of a myriad stars, was curiously transparent. Somewhere behind the hills an invisible gateway was opening through which the light of a full moon—the harvest moon—was flooding.

But as yet the only illumination in the camp came from the moving torches, where men threaded their way between the tents, or a noble passed hither and yon with his retinue.

Flares reflected ruddily upon the standard of Paluwan Khan, among the dark lines of horses of the Punjabi cavalry. Voices echoed from the water tank, about which groups of footmen, armor and weapons put aside, gambled and sang.

As an undertone to this came the ceaseless mutter of camels, coughing and grunting over their fodder, and—at intervals—the bellowing call of an elephant.

"Soon, Hossein," whispered the Slayer, "the moon will be up."

"Aye, lord."

"Before then——"

Alacha's low voice dwindled into silence. His forehead was very hot, although the chill of evening had settled upon the earth. Restlessly his hands twitched at his throat. Every nerve seemed to be on fire.

What monumental folly had sent Nur-Jahan incognito to the camp and to him? Was she truly without a protector other than stout Geron? Was it all not the invisible working of fate?

Fate had been kind to Alacha. He was fast rising to greatness. A moment's boldness——

"MY LORD?" came the servile voice of Hossein, fawning.

To-morrow—Alacha's racing thoughts resumed their trend—Nur-Jahan might reveal her identity to the other ameers. She might influence them to peace. Aye, she might well strip Alacha of his prestige by a single word whispered in her soft voice into the ear of Jahangir. Already she had hinted she thought Alacha unfaithful to his master.

In this she had wronged Alacha, who served Jahangir well, serving himself the while, as a clever man should. So the Turkoman reasoned with his thoughts. And there came into his mind unbidden the vision of the clear brown eyes of the famous Persian, the alertness and vital energy of her figure, full-fledged in beauty.

"A jewel of paradise," he breathed. "Aye, more splendid than the throne of the Mogul——"

"My lord?"

"Before the moon rises," said Alacha slowly, harkening curiously to the sound of his own words, "go unseen to yonder tent."

He pointed, and as he did so the glimmer faded from the silk.

"The Circassian lies there asleep, doubtless across the threshold. Note his position and keep watch. Remain there until I come."

"Aye, lord."

In the darkness Hossein smiled, seeing how his fortunes might be replenished. He bowed and slipped away along the dark stretch of the *khanate*, moving softly for all his bulk.

Alacha clapped his hands, and a servant ran from his pavilion to his side.

"Horses," he commanded. "Two of the best. Have them brought to the outskirts of the grove—" again he pointed—"and tethered there. Do not abide by the horses, but return hither. Haste!"

Scarcely had the footsteps of the man, running barefoot, ceased, when Alacha turned aside and stalked rapidly through the tents toward the pavilion of Paluwan Khan.

By now Alacha knew that the Northern Lord would be abed, on his cloak spread on the bare ground, half-unconscious from the effects of a drinking-bout. And not otherwise did he find the khan.

Without returning the hurried salute of the guard at the pavilion door the Turkoman leaned over the squat figure snoring on disordered garments and shook him by the shoulder.

A man awakened from sleep is bemused, and if tired angry. Having emptied many cups of rare wine of Kabul and Ferghana, Paluwan Kkan first reached for his sword, then swore roundly.

"Hide of a dog——"

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Alacha squatted close to him, speaking swiftly. A spy, he said, had come to the camp. A wandering Persian courtezan in the pay of their enemies had sought to beguile him—Alacha.

"Carcass of Satan!" observed Paluwan Khan drowsily. "Well she knew in what quarter to ply her arts! You have a dagger. Make an end of her and let me sleep."

"She it was who rode up to us when the sun had crossed the midway (the afternoon)—the mistress of the Circassian——"

"Geron? He is no traitor."

Alacha's bright eyes narrowed. For a moment he had forgotten that Paluwan Khan knew the identity of the armorer. He smiled at the drowsy chieftain ironically.

"Ha, my lord! Think you the armorer of Jahangir would wander afield in rags like a stray beggar? Nay. I believe the two to be friends of the Mongol warrior who invaded the court of the king of kings——"

"Say you so?"

Paluwan Khan had a blunt brain. Jahangir had once observed that while Alacha held too much pride in his brain-cup Paluwan Khan held too many cups in his brain. Now he thought dully of the act of Nur-Jahan in befriending the Afghan girl, and swore drowsily.

"Send her then," he growled, "to —— or the Mogul. What affair is it of mine?"

"She is quartered near to you," responded Alacha quickly. "Grant me a following of four Punjabis—your men—and I will seek her out——"

"Aye," muttered the khan. "Make an end, by Allah. It is written that the tongue of a woman is evil as the bite of a serpent——"

He was already asleep. Alacha summoned the two spearmen who had heard the speech of the nobles, and called up two from the outer guard. With these Punjabis he hastened back to his tent, giving them whispered instructions on the way. From the tent they sought the grove of trees, under which shadows were just forming as moonlight swept the sky over the mountain-peaks.

Came Hossein to his side with a sibilant word. Laying aside their spears—clumsy weapons for hand-to-hand work—the four sturdy men of Paluwan Khan slipped to the door of the tent and disappeared within.

Alacha, who had been at some pains to have others than his own men attack Geron in case his plan should miscarry, moved nearer. He heard a low exclamation, the sound of a blow.

Dimly he made out struggling figures within the pavilion. Hossein with a grin of hate drew his dagger and stepped warily nearer. Then, running forward, he struck viciously at a man who grappled with two others.

Alacha saw the two draw back, saw the mottled moonlight glimmer on the light curls of Geron, who took an unsteady step forward, staring at the Slayer with wide eyes that saw naught but a red mist of pain.

Geron gave a grunting cry and sank to the earth, clutching his throat. Pausing only long enough to make sure that Hossein had dealt the giant armorer a deadly blow, Alacha stepped over the prone form of a Punjabi and peered at the woman, who had risen from the couch.

Within the tent the moonlight took on a strange, silvery semblance, shot through with the black arms that were shadows from the branches of trees. It sparkled faintly on the jewels upon the hands of stately Nur-Jahan, and glowed with a flame-like radiance along the string of pearls at her smooth throat.

Swiftly she drew veil across her mouth.

"What means this? Where is Geron?"

"Slain by some Punjabi revelers. Oh khanum, there is peril for you here. Come!"

Alacha stepped toward her and grasped her wrist, his own hand far from steady. The woman's quick intuition warned her, and she drew away.

The man's arm closed about her throat; fingers pressed against her lips. Nur-Jahan thrust at him, her body tense with anger and fright. A quick word and Hossein came, gathering her in huge arms, lifting her to his stout shoulder. To the horses he carried her, being skilled in the handling of women, and laid her across the saddle-peak of one.

Alacha, breathing deeply, stared into the shadows in the tent-corners, moving silently about. His pulse was unruly, and he shivered more than once.

The Afghan girl, he knew, must be within the tent, and her mouth as well as Geron's must be sealed, for there was no way to know what Nur-Jahan had said to Tala in the earlier hours of the night.

Then did Alacha pause in his tracks, his dark head thrust forward between his slender shoulders, the fingers of a groping hand outstretched rigidly.

"Death of the gods!" he swore.

So near to him that his fingers almost touched her cheek he saw, not a tousled-haired, tattered Afghan girl, but a shapely maiden whose black ringlets hung down over her breast, whose garments were of fine silk and velvet, who wore across her throat a slim chain of bead-like black pearls.

The silver-like radiance from above touched her high forehead strongly. Her motionless eyes stared stolidly into his. It seemed to Alacha—such illusions being sometimes wrought by overstrained nerves—that the figure of the woman had stepped forward through the fabric of the tent.

In reality Tala, who had remained motionless, hoping to escape unseen, was half-paralyzed by the nearness of the Slayer and by the menace of his silent search.

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Yet Alacha saw only the likeness of a young girl, who had worn those same pearls and garments like to these—an Afghan girl who had slain herself while he held her upon his saddle.

"How came you here?" he muttered, feeling a chill course through his nerves. "What——"

Not until now had he seen Tala's face unveiled, nor did he know that she was sister to the woman he had caused to die. Instinctively, mastered by mounting fright, Tala raised her hand to her throat.

To Alacha the gesture was significant, menacing. He drew back a step; then, overcome by an impulse of fear, he turned and fled from the tent.

When the Punjabis, ordered by Alacha to search the tent, came to look for the woman he had seen, they saw naught but the empty recess of the pavilion and the deserted couch of Nur-Jahan. Tala had slipped under the tent-wall and fled into the grove.

Presently Hossein moved away through the trees, with his prisoner in his arms. From the grove he struck into a winding path that led through the scattered bazaars of the camp-followers, to the outer lines of the imperial forces and thence to a sheep-track up the hillside.

And after him, slipping from shadow to shadow, came two ponies, stolen from the mounts of the cavalry, and upon these rode Tala and Chan, the minstrel, wearing the garb of a begging *kwajah*.

"For," Chan had whispered to Tala, "the Slayer said to Hossein that before long he would come to seek the woman, and it is my thought that he will come alone."

"It is the will of God," responded Tala.

AT THE council of the ameers the following morning Paluwan Khan smote impatiently with his scabbard upon the carpet before his feet, crying in a mighty voice:

"An end, say I. By the beard of Ali, we will bring these ill-omened ones to a battle. My horsemen have pushed them back and up the broad valley of Badakshan, and now they are at the last of their villages—the whole scum of the devil brood. Now they must fight or give up their lands——"

"A scant battle will it be," remarked the chivalrous raja, who had all the Rajput distaste of facing an inferior foe. "Yet some tidings have come to me of horsemen riding hither from Mongolia. What say you, Alacha?"

The Turkoman smiled ironically.

"One horseman might come, but not an army. Even the raja's men would not face the Autumn cold of the upper passes, where snow will soon cover the ground."

"Nor," nodded Raja Man Singh, "can even the fiends of the air find sufficient food to feed a clan on yonder rock-ravines and desolate forests."

"Aye," growled Paluwan Khan impatiently, "it is said that demons and the likeness of foul creatures infest the spaces of the roof of the world, who prey upon travelers. What manner of men would follow a leader through such-like? *Khosh*. It may not be."

He turned to Alacha with reawakened curiosity.

"Ho, lord, what did you with the Persian wench—send her to —— or the Mogul?"

Boisterously he laughed, but Alacha, whose face was somewhat strained, did not smile.

"Not to the Mogul," he said.

Now, following upon this council of the chiefs, the bulk of the imperial army pressed onward toward the upper limits of Badakshan, moving in an orderly mass with artillery and musket-men with the baggage in the center and the cavalry upon the outskirts.

And the chiefs of many villages of the north came to Abdul Dost, crying:

"We have seen the flames of our homes and the slaughter of our cattle. Will ye not give battle before all Badakshan is lost?"

To each of these the Afghan leader made the same response.

"It is not yet time."

And the Afghans saw that he looked much to the dark lines in the distant hills that were the passes to the north, and steadfastly watched the sky for signs of storm.

"It is not yet time," he said again.

CHAPTER X

Through the gate in the mountain comes the *buran*, the wind that destroys. Shepherds and the flocks of shepherds die at the cold touch of the *buran*.

From the iron gate of the winds in the sky comes the *buran*, and where it breathes is desolation.

Before the time of our fathers and their fathers and the memory of the oldest men there came through the gate of the mountain the Destroyer.

Genghis Khan, the Destroyer, rode through the gateway of Mongolia and in his path there was desolation.

"AYE, before the memory of man there came the sea of ice, and the mountains of ice, and no life was in Sungaria.

"Aye, khans of the Horde, the ice moved down from the north, sweeping across the plains of the Mongols as the waves of sand now move across the plains; but when the ice came to the mountains of the roof of the world it went no farther. Yet here, lords of Mongolia, are the traces of the ice to be seen, graven upon broad, flat stones.

"And before the ice fled the great elephants with tusks as long as a bent tree, and hide heavy-coated—like yonder yak, lords of the Horde."

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A minstrel who rode with the Mongols pointed to a herd of the shaggy, clumsy yaks grazing by the shore of the lake. Already hunters had circled from the Horde to slay the beasts and bring their meat to the next camp.

"That was the age of the hero-spirits, lords," he recited. "The *tengri-bogdo* dwelt upon the heights, and many were the battles they waged. Aye, many the palaces they built of mountain rock that reached to the heavens.

"Upon the winds they rode, leaping from hill-top to plain at a single bound, *pouf*—like the blast of the wind. The arrows they shot were fashioned of the shafts of pine-trees, and still you may see the marks where the arrows pierced the mountain slopes."

Whereupon he pointed to gullies and giant crevices in the range of hills they were approaching to the south.

"After the spirit heroes came the yellow-haired men from the West, my lords. With long swords they drove the servants of Berkhan before them, driving the Mongols east. They died, and then through the gate came Genghis the Mighty. Aye, his banners moved before the winds to the west, and many were the lands he conquered.*"

With a shout of approval the khans greeted the song of the minstrel, pressing their horses forward eagerly. They did not know that Khlit, who rode at their head, had asked the minstrel to repeat his song as they rode, thus driving fatigue from the minds of his followers.

The Horde had passed through the lake region of Sungaria, splashing along the flooded shores, finding game abundant. They had slept little, covering some seventy miles a day.

Khlit had not wished to urge his horsemen to their speed until the Sungarian Gate should be passed, knowing that it is not well to start too hastily upon a forced march.

He knew well the great task that had confronted them—the journey from the southern limit of the Mongolian plain to the northern tip of Afghanistan. And he calculated that this was to be done in three weeks if he was to aid Abdul Dost as he had promised. By that time, even allowing for a late season, the passes of the Hindu Kush would be rice-coated and impenetrable.

They had followed the horse-track that led to the south beside the lake of Ebi Nor (The Wind Lake) and Sairam Nor, instead of the broader, more passable caravan-route that made a détour to the west.

Some of the Tatars had brought *yurts*—heavy, felt tents, erected upon poles—on the backs of pack-horses. Seeing this, Khlit had said nothing to the warriors in question. Yet at their first camp and their second, he made these men fetch the water and collect dried camel-dung for fires.

When he repeated this performance at the third camp, within the entrance of the Sungarian Gate, and it became clear that his selection of the men was no longer a matter of mere chance, the offending Tatars left their *yurts* standing and rode on, baggageless like the rest.

"In the Gate," they grumbled, being aggrieved, "we will meet the spirits of the *buran*, and the icy wind will bar our passage. Aye, the spirits of the heights will be angry. By what right does this warrior make himself our lord?"

Khlit heard, and remembered, and said nothing.

He mounted before daylight, nor did he call a halt that day or night. The Tatars shifted from time to time to their spare horses, and ate strips of smoke-cured meat in the saddle. Many slept as they rode.

To the west appeared a wide level of steppe, dotted with lakes, stretching to the horizon—a vast expanse of blue. Far before them the snow-peaks of the *Ala tau* loomed in the veils of mist.

"This is the limit of our land," said some within hearing of Khlit. "And this is the last of the steppe. Before us are the spirit mountains where we have never gone. Upon their summits the *ghils* call to men, unseen, plaintively, and the men follow and die——"

"Once through the Sungarian Gate, how may we win back to our Sungarian land?" assented others, feeling perhaps the first irking of fatigue, or being desirous of their homes.

These were the younger warriors, with some of the *shamans*, the conjurer-priests.

AT NOON that day, midway through the pass, Khlit rode back into the gatherings of the grumblers.

"Aye," he said to the younger men, "this is the end of your land. If you would return to the *karaul* of your people, do so now. Because from this point you must go forward with me."

He had halted the long ranks of riders that stretched the length of the pass like an endless caravan, the sunlight glittering on lines of spear-points.

"The Horde will wait," he said grimly, "while you ride past."

The Tatars who had been talking of the Gate looked at each other, and no one moved. It was their fashion to grumble, and they knew that never before in the annals of their armies had men forsaken the standard during a campaign.

"Ha!" Chagan, the sword-bearer, pulled at his long mustache that hung down on the sides of his massive chin, blackened to the eyes by exposure to the sun. "That is well. The first warrior to move would have died at my hand."

* Legends of the Sungarian Gate, leading from Mongolia into Europe.

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He surveyed the cloaked forms of the *shamans*, the priests who had scented spoil in the expedition.

"It is fitting," he added, "that the masters of magic should abide in this accursed place of spirits, so that the *tengri* of the air will send no evil magic upon the heels of our passage."

In speaking thus he followed carefully the words of Khlit, who had reason to know the treacherous greed of the conjurers. The Tatar warriors, those who had spoken too freely, seized this occasion to wax mirthful at the expense of the *shamans* who were forced—perhaps not unwillingly—to remain in the Gate.

All but one did so, and returned to the *karaul* by the lakes. This one, Gutchluk by name, brooded much over the words of Chagan, and suspected Khlit to be the author thereof.

This Gutchluk, having traveled to the holy city of Lhassa, and learned many secrets of religion and priesthood from the disciples of the arch-priest, the Dalai Lama, bethought him of the Turkomans, whom he had once visited, and the wealth that was reputed to be in the coffers of the Ameers of the Mogul—especially of Alacha, who was known to him.

And so that night he rode south and west, circling the moving lines of horsemen, carrying with him a small pack upon the back of his pony.

And in this manner in the course of a few days word began to drift through the passes to the adherents of Alacha, the Slayer, that the Horde was riding south.

That night there was a moon and the Tatars gazed down upon the troubled waters of the lakes below the pass, seeing their ruffled, wind-tossed surface and the white lines of breakers on the shore—although at the altitude of the pass no air was stirring.

"Lo," muttered a broad-faced warrior, "the pent winds have escaped; they have come to the Gate."

"Yet," responded Chagan readily, "the spirits of the air be friendly to us, for they smite not at us. They ride with us, against our foes."

This remark was passed from mouth to mouth, and worked the leaven of courage.

The next day, when dawn struck into the gray sky overhead, Khlit, glancing back, saw the loom of heavy clouds above the pass and the darkness of hail. He shook his head and glanced before the moving ranks of the Horde, to the gray mists and the hidden ravines of the mountains.

Now within the hour the riders in the van came upon the skull of a wolf resting in the branches of a tree and below it the weather-smoothed skull of a man.

"An evil omen," cried some.

Others, noting the fresh track of a pony leading south, were puzzled, not knowing of the flight of Gutchluk.

After watching the last of his men file from the Alau ravines, Khlit halted Berang, khan of the Torgot clan and commander of the rear guard.

The youthful chieftain, keen-eyed and quiet, had been a close companion of Khlit in the days when the Cossack had been Kha Khan of the Horde.

"Yield your banner to another," ordered Khlit, "and prepare to ride ahead, seizing what guides you may—but in no case a Turkoman."

Riding bridle to bridle with the gaily dressed Tatar—for Berang unlike his companions rejoiced in green and red leathers, in silver accouterments, chased mail and a purple Chinese cap with peacock feather—Khlit explained that the khan was to seek out Abdul Dost in the northern limits of Badakshan, "striking equally south and west, by the course of the sun, past the eastern end of Issyuk Kul, the Lake of the Clouds, and so up into the passes of the Hindu Kush——"

"Say to the leader of the Afghans that the Horde will join him within ten days. Before then he must not give battle. Return then up the course of the upper Oxus until you meet with us."

The brown eyes of the young leader flashed.

"It shall be done. A swift journey to the Horde!"

"*Ahatou khan, temou chou!*" (Brother khan, dwell in peace.)

Khlit watched the erect form of the warrior speed past the marching groups. Berang, he knew, could be relied on. And by now the followers of Abdul Dost must be in sore need.

SWIFTLY the black mass of the Horde, like the swarm of so many giant bees, spread over the green levels of the Ili Valley, where the sun was yet warm, and flowers were in the grass. Nor did they pause in crossing the river, for each warrior swam his horse into the bosom of the slow stream, tugging behind him the spare mount. And here were found herds of gazelle, to be shot down by youthful archers; likewise sheep, to be taken at will—the fat-tailed sheep of the Kirghiz.

By the Ili, Khlit halted for a day and a night to rest the horses, and the impatient Tatars grumbled thereat. Many khans who had not before this experienced the weight of Khlit's hand talked among themselves of seizing the leadership—for it was the Tatar nature to be restless under a strange leader, or under any leader at all.

Being restless, they drank overmuch—the fare being rich for the day—of *kumiss*, and so lay drunk in their coats about the camp.

Khlit had slept long that day, and on awaking at sunset mounted and made the rounds of the camp. Groups of warriors followed him idly to where the drunken men lay, to see how he would deal with this happening.

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If the Cossack should ignore the conduct of the revelers it would countenance feasting and drunkenness on the march. And this would have pleased the warriors—all but the wiser heads.

So, many hard eyes followed the Kha Khan as he reined in his horse by the empty *kumiss*-casks and the prone figures. No one was with him.

Noting this, the old Cossack signed for the watchers to approach, as they did, afoot and unarmed.

"These be thirsty dogs."

He pointed at the befuddled forms clustered about the casks.

"Give them to drink. Strip them and cast them into the river."

For a space warrior looked at warrior appraisingly. They were in an idle mood, not altogether harmless—an idleness bred of the sun's warmth and the long sleep on the grass. Some swore, others scowled. Khlit watched them silently.

"Blood of Natagai!" bellowed a reeling khan. "I and my brothers will die, for we can not swim—thus."

"Die then," said Khlit coldly. "Those who have their wits will live."

He swung savagely on the watchers.

"Ye heard me?"

They moved uncertainly. Then a broad-faced, flat-backed youngster laughed aloud.

"Ho, we will see if they can swim!"

Whereupon the mood of the crowd changed. They grinned and sought out the offenders. A struggle began, and as it waxed the good humor of the crowd increased. Clothing and armor were torn from the drunkards. Naked forms were carried to the river-bank and cast into the stream.

It became a game—a game such as the blunt natures of these men could understand. Many more ran up, and of the newcomers the *kumiss* drinkers were singled out and plunged into the cold current.

Some sank to their death, but the majority were revived sufficiently to swim and made their way ashore, more or less sobered. Word of the jest spread through the camp, and the *kumiss*-casks were shunned perforce.

And another word was passed from clan to clan.

"Khlit, the Kha Khan, has spoken an order. The Horde is on the march, and while it is so, and he is our leader, death will be the lot of the man who drinks fermented spirits. Our leader was once *ataman* of the Kazak Horde, and this was the law he learned."

From this time forth the iron authority of the old Cossack was felt. Not for nothing had Khlit lived the greater number of years of his life in the war encampment of the Cossacks, where harsh discipline was visited upon the few for the welfare of the many.

Other things than this he had learned When the Horde swarmed across the divide north of Issyuk Kul and the leather shoes of many ponies gave out on the rocks and the grit of sandstone, Khlit ordered rough shoes fashioned of the hides of slain yaks. And on leaving the shores of the lake he had the men cut grass, chop it fine with their swords and put it into the capacious saddle-bags with the rations of barley for the horses—rations gleaned from the Kirghiz and Turkoman villages by the lake.

"For when the ponies suffer from thirst in the mountain ravines they will not eat of the barley without the grass," he said.

And when in the passes of the upper Hindu Kush the Autumn hailstorms swept down upon their backs, and snow swirled about the giant peaks overhead, he cried to the minstrels to sing and would not halt.

"Sleep here is evil," he warned.

The Tatars dozed as they rode. This time there were no complaints. When Chagan carried the choice hind quarter of a slain sheep to Khlit he had it divided among the nearest followers, saying that the barley which sufficed his horse would do for him.

He was silent at these times, and thoughtful. While the Horde was making speed over almost continuous obstacles—torrents that must be bridged, slippery slopes that must be climbed, in the growing cold that numbed men and horses inexorably—Khlit knew that as yet the warriors were not a whole, were not knit together.

But the Tatars themselves were now content. Endurance was bred in their natures, and they laughed from cracked lips at their sufferings.

"The Kha Khan is worthy," they said. "We will follow him."

"He is a wise leader," they said. "He has lost none of his old cunning."

Their confidence soared, for they believed they were invincible as the host of Genghis Khan, of which the minstrels sang.

But Khlit knew that he was leading a mass of undisciplined horsemen, splendid fighters individually, yet armed only with bows and their heavy, curved swords against the coordinated whole of the Mogul's array—elephants, cannon, foot and horse.

He looked back down the dark defiles where the ranks of horsemen trotted, heedless of suffering, intent only on winning forward under his guidance.

"O my brothers," he muttered in his beard," God grant I keep faith with you."

Now as the Horde moved through the Hindu Kush, through the rock gates of the place that is called the roof of the world, certain wandering Kirghiz huntsmen saw them from a distance and fled away, bearing a message of fear.

"In the mists of the passes spirits ride," they said in the hill villages. "Their faces are

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black and they move with the speed of demons of the higher world. Crows and kites follow their course."

"If birds follow," observed villagers who had not seen the Horde, "they must be men."

"But we have not seen the like of such men."

And in the grass valleys of the upper *pamirs* —stretches of moss—like meadows above the timber-line—shepherds ran in, crying.

"Surely there is fear and doom afoot. For we heard trumpets at sunrise, and the *nakars*, the cymbals of the Mongols, even as our fathers heard the trumpets of Genghis Khan. And the tramp of a multitude sounded, where we could see no riders."

Word of this passed from mouth to mouth, as such things do, and came at last to the ranks of the Mogul's army.

CHAPTER XI

THE EYE OF THE MOUNTAIN

UNTIL daybreak, the night of the slaying of Geron, Hossein rode steadily along the trails that led to the heights of the Hindu Kush above the timber-line.

Nur-Jahan, held across his stout knees, cried that she was the bride-to-be of the Mogul, and Hossein laughed.

"A pretty song, my Persian nightingale! So have other captives of my master Alacha twittered and wept. You do not weep."

"I am Nur-Jahan."

The Turk threw back his massive head and roared with mirth.

"Aye, the Light of the World. Well, then the world will soon be dark. By Allah, would I had that necklace that lies about your beautiful throat, my khanum."

His hairy hand felt appraisingly of the pearls under her veil, but he knew too well the moods of his master to deprive Alacha of such jewels. So Nur-Jahan sank into disturbed silence as they rode under pines and ever upward beside waterfalls.

With daybreak Hossein dismounted and bound his captive skilfully by the hands and feet, using his own girdle. Then he drank heavily of the water from the freshet they were following, called Ali to witness that his belly yearned, and straightway fell asleep, sprawled near the prone woman, his mouth open and snores vibrating from his nose.

Then for the first time Nur-Jahan wept at the disgrace, struggling vainly to undo her bonds. Strangely enough she once fancied that a small, turbaned man drew near the sound of her lament and peered through a tangle of dying junipers. Blinded by her tears, she was not sure, and when she cried out Hossein wakened with a curse.

In time came a servant of Alacha, who gave Hossein whispered instructions, with food; and when the sun was high the Turk ate the best of the provender—tossing her an oatmeal cake that she would not touch—and climbed upon his horse, forcing her to walk.

Slowly they passed onward along the trails, seeing at times flying Afghan shepherds and children driving cattle headlong into secret places. The scent of smoke drifted to them, and when at length they came out into a clearing on the mountainside the Persian could make out on the great plain to their left scattered bodies of Afghan horse wheeling in flight, and dense masses of Rajput cavalry moving through burning villages.

"What means this?" she cried.

Hossein pointed to clouds of dust in the distance.

"The army advances and drives the ill-omened ones, like animals, into the wilds, my Persian lady," he observed indifferently. "Come, Alacha has a nest just above here where he often spied out what passed on the plain. He bade us wait for him there at the eye of the mountain."

Nur-Jahan looked longingly at the steep slope, almost a precipice, stretching down from her feet. She was very tired and Hossein had kept her hands bound and the end of the girdle in his own hand.

The place he spoke of was around a bend in the trail they had been following—a nest of rocks overlooking the narrow ribbon of the upper Oxus. A cave of sorts afforded some protection. Here Hossein turned the horse loose to graze as best it might among ferns and thorns and thrust her into the cave, squatting in front of it sleepily.

Under the lofty sandstone roof of the cave there was no sun, and the chill of the place, where water dripped unseen down the walls, struck through the thin garments of the Persian. She sat passive upon the cold rock floor, mind and body alike numbed by hunger. As time passed she became conscious of a tumult on the plain below, of distant cries and the occasional clash of steel.

Anxiously she went to the cave entrance and inquired of Hossein what was happening.

The Turk, irritated by the lack of food and wine in the plentiful measure to which he was accustomed, muttered at her savagely.

"Back into your darkness, Light of the World! What cares a light-of-love such as you what passes on the field of battle?"

"A battle!" Nur-Jahan sighed. "Are the armies engaged?"

"Aye, yonder fools on both sides cut each other up as a Gulf Arab slices fish for a stinking bazaar. They sprinkle foul carcasses hither and yon, food for the kites. 'Tis but a skirmish in which the accursed Pathans seem to have the upper hand—yet I scent a wile of my master,

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Alacha. Heaven grant he come soon, with eatables and drinkables——"

Whereupon he thrust her back and watched suspiciously until the evening, when the tumult below died out as the shadows lengthened from the mountains across the broad valley of Badakshan, and Alacha came jauntily riding a nimble Kabuli mare and clad in all his elegance.

He glanced sharply at the prostrate Hossein and ordered him to leave the cave entrance.

"A bite of food for your slave," mumbled the Turk, and Alacha impatiently waved him away.

"There be berries among the thorns, dog, and roots for such as thou."

Whereupon Hossein departed, scowling, and Alacha stood at the entrance to the cavern. Nur-Jahan faced him at once.

"A dog you called yonder cutthroat, yet what word will suffice for you, my lord?" she said softly. "When Jahangir learns that you have laid hand upon his bride?"

The Turkoman rested a slim hand against the rock and peered at her, smiling, in the gloom.

"Nur-Jahan? Verily she is at the court for all I know. You name yourself falsely, my beautiful Persian, christening—as do the Christian infidels—yourself with lofty lineage. *Ohai*, do you think to make me believe that you are the Light of the World?"

"When you slew Geron basely, you believed."

"The slave was a Christian *caphar*—unbeliever. His death has earned Hossein a niche in the Prophet's paradise, or purgatory—I care not which. Only fools pay obeisance to a god, and death is often the reward of folly. Yet you are wise, my lady. You have learned somewhat of my power——"

"Have you done this?"

The woman pointed down at the mist-covered expanse of the valley where camp-fires, numerous as the stars, sparkled from the hillside under their feet to the distant Hindu Kush.

"Against my warning and advice have you entered upon battle with the Afghans at this limit of their land?"

ALACHA surveyed her in silence, noting how the shadows dwelt in her dark hair, and how fair her forehead was over the veil. Her voice, he thought, was chill as the sandstone cliff that towered overhead.

"Evil will come of this, my lord," she said softly. "Death will walk among your ranks in the valley, for cornered men fight like beasts——"

"And like beasts will we slay them," he nodded. "The Afghan blight will be cleansed from the border of the empire; we will wipe clean the blotch of treachery with the blood of punishment——"

"So that honor and gold will be paid to you and Paluwan Khan," she hissed.

"To me, yes; to the Northern Lord, perhaps. Verily, it was my doing, my lady. A spy of mine, a wretched *shaman* of the Turkoman race, Gutchluk, who once had the immeasurable distinction of explaining his beggarly faith to me—Gutchluk, I say, rode to my tent full of some tale of a Mongol Horde, hither bound. He mouthed big words, yet I know the northern passes and fear no Tatars.

"This Gutchluk I used. I sent him, pretending he was envoy from the Mongol chief, Khlit, to Abdul Dost——"

"And this false priest advised the Afghan to give battle?"

"Ah, you are clever, my Persian dove, my beautiful courtezan."

Nur-Jahan stiffened in impotent wrath at the insult.

"Aye, that was his tale. Who may pen the waters when the dam is burst? Abdul Dost's soul—does a man of slow wit possess a soul?—was harassed by continued retreat. His followers were nagging him to let them cast their bodies against the chained cannon and the musket-balls of the Mogul's men. So did he draw up his wild clans for battle, and some few horsemen of his——"

"Were permitted to score a false victory?"

"To smite off a few heads of opium-besotted Rajputs. This, like strong wine, will go to the heads of the Afghans, and on the morrow or the next day—Gutchluk will contrive to steal back to me here this night and report the hour chosen by Abdul Dost for the final assault—these same Afghans will go headless to their hell, like masterless sheep before the storm."

"Most wise Alacha! Have you thought of your fate?"

"To be beloved by the fairest flower of the Persian garden—a fair fate, and to my liking."

His soft voice became musical, and he bent nearer to the woman, who stood like a slender lily, outlined against the face of the rock. Over their heads a moon was rising, and its glow pierced the cavern mouth. The dark eyes of Nur-Jahan were raised to its light.

Alacha reached forth and tore the veil from her head, drawing a quick breath as he gazed upon the dim features of the Persian girl whose beauty had made a slave of a monarch.

"Fair, most fair," he mused. "Soon the moon will be higher, and then will I drink of your loveliness closer, my lady. Ah, the Master Potter to Whom men pray under one name or another, never fashioned with greater artistry the clay of a human form. Aye, the Master Weaver who knits the threads of human fate has given you to me. Will you not

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sit and drink of the rare wine I have carried hither, and the sweetmeats?"

"Aye," said the woman suddenly, "I will."

So, watched closely by the Turkoman, Nur-Jahan fetched a clean linen cloth and twin gold cups, with a small wine-jar and dishes of rice, fruit and sugared dates, from his saddle-bags. These she spread before the mouth of the cavern and seated herself upon a stone, partaking a little of the rice and dates and pretending to drink.

No opportunity offered for her to escape. Down the path up which Alacha had come she perceived the bulk of Hossein, and in the thicket beside the face of the rock she fancied that the form of another watcher was visible. Overhead the cliff rose almost sheer; below there was a gradual slope covered by an impenetrable tangle of thorns.

True, the upper trail was clear. But Nur-Jahan's dainty feet and slippers were not fashioned for running, nor could she hope to outdistance the Turkoman.

Alacha poured a slight oblation upon the turf.

"To *kismet*, by whatever name suits best."

His voice had become gentle. He reminded the woman that no one except Hossein knew of her coming to the camp, and Hossein was his man. Paluwan Khan knew a little, but the Northern Lord might well be slain in the coming battle.

Victory, thanks to the good offices of Gutchluk, was certain. What tribes could stand against the Mogul's ranks?

The victory would make Alacha an ameer, a mighty noble. India from the Indus to the Oxus would be under his rule. He would be wealthy as a caliph.

Nur-Jahan would find her lot as mistress in one of his castles a pleasant one. Willingly or not, this would be her fate. Better willingly. Was it not pleasanter than her lot as a wanderer in Persia?

"So this," she replied quietly," is the way you serve your lord?"

Alacha found her calmness a trifle disconcerting; nevertheless, her pride satisfied his vanity. He tasted of the sugared fruit and smiled, thin-lipped.

"Jahangir—he who was to be your potent husband, my khanum—Jahangir has said, 'Kingship knows no kinship.' Thus do I say, 'Service knows no mastery.' Myself alone I serve. I can not win to greatness save through the Mogul, so—I can not risk that he should know what has passed here."

"And I?"

"You are a precious pearl, beyond price. You are the fairest woman of two lands. Like the essence of the poppy is your beauty—intoxicating, poisonous, deadly."

Nur-Jahan had lifted the cup to her full lips, dissembling to drink therefrom. Some drops, escaping the cup as her hand trembled, fell dark upon the linen.

As Alacha leaned nearer, seeking words to express the passion that swelled at his heart, she slipped a small hand forward along the cloth. Her fingers rose toward his belt.

Smiling, Alacha caught her hand away from his dagger-hilt.

"A dangerous plaything—steel—my fair flower. Was it for this you drank with me?"

He gripped her other wrist, drawing her toward him, his eyes seeking hers, that flew desperately to cliff and thorn-patch—then riveted to stillness.

"I would drink the charm of your eyes," he whispered, breathing quickly through parted lips.

It was Alacha's moment of triumph, when success and mastery over a matchless woman were his.

IT WAS but a brief moment. With a sharp exclamation he released her wrists, staring at the thing that Nur-Jahan had been watching over his shoulder. A rider in armor sat a horse at the bend of the trail by the cavern, and neither horse nor rider moved.

By now the moon had come up into the sky and shed a clear light upon the grassy terrace before the cave. In its dancing glow—for moonlight has the quality of a transparent veil cast over the objects of earth—Alacha saw that the horseman was strange in seeming.

A squat, erect body appeared to melt into the outlines of a shaggy pony. Where a fur cloak parted over broad shoulders the moonlight glinted on mail. Above a square, dark face as expressionless as an obelisk, a thin feather projected fantastically. To the riders' knee clung a curving sword that was fashioned by no smith of Persia, India, or Khorassan.

"Who comes?" cried Alacha, stumbling to his feet. "By the heart of Satan—what man are you?"

Startled, his quick nerves never of the steadiest, Alacha fancied that the uncouth form was truly one of the *ghils* of the heights that descended upon humankind. The silence of the rider stirred his fear the more.

"Hossein!" he cried shrilly. "Hossein! Fat whelp—aid me!"

To this cry also there came no answer. But the rider paced his horse forward, and stood, with a single movement, upon the earth within reach of Alacha. No move he made to draw weapon, but stared curiously from the woman to the Turkoman.

Then Nur-Jahan laughed, although unsteadily.

"My lord Alacha," she cried, "a Mongol has come to Badakshan."

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"A spirit of evil," he muttered, drawing back. "Hossein, good Hossein, a hundred gold mohars if you slay me this evil one."

The Mongol warrior had caught but one word of Nur-Jahan's speaking.

"I am Berang Khan," his deep voice growled.

The words rolled gutturally from his chest.

"In the mists along the river I lost my way. To this height I came, to see the better. Who is this prince?"

He nodded his broad head at Alacha, and Nur-Jahan, who had picked up some fragments of the Tatar tongue in her early wandering through the northern lands, made quick, albeit broken reply.

"A noble of Ind."

Berang took a step forward to peer with childlike interest at the first foeman who had crossed his path.

Alacha waited for no more, sensing the menace in the fearless approach of the Khan. Berang in fact would have slain him the next moment had not the Turkoman drawn his knife and struck like a flash, reaching for his simitar simultaneously.

The slayer had moved with feline quickness, but had made no allowance for Berang's mode of fighting. A born swordsman, the khan did not grasp his weapon hurriedly, but stepped back. A short pace that brought Alacha's dagger-point down upon his broad chest instead of his throat.

The slim blade snapped against the heavy mail, and when Alacha's simitar slashed at his foeman's neck Berang's short heavy sword, curved like a crescent moon but square at the end, knocked the stroke aside as a bear sweeps down a deer's horn with a blow of the paw.

Berang swung his weapon in a glittering circle of steel that knocked Alacha to earth, with crushed ribs and chest cut half in two under the severed Damascus mail. Under impact of such a blow the Slayer rolled over twice on the grass and lay while air whistled through the cut in his side from the pierced lung.

Then the khan wheeled alertly, seeing two figures glide into the moonlight. He checked the sweep of his sword as he saw them to be a turbaned cripple bearing a bow without arrows, and at his side a young girl.

"Hossein," observed Chan to Nur-Jahan, "will not come. For once the stomach of the Turk is filled—with arrows."

He stared at Berang eagerly.

"You are from the Horde?" he cried. "What do you seek?"

"A khan of the Afghans. Abdul Dost."

Chan turned to Tala, with whom he had waited for a day and a night, until the coming of Alacha. The Afghan girl was bending over the dying Turkoman, holding his head close to hers by the hair.

"Now, O Slayer," cried Chan," look upon Death!"

And in very truth it must have seemed to the dying Turkoman that he looked upon one who was dead, for the aspect of Tala's face and dress was like that of the woman who had died under his hand.

"I swore an oath," nodded the minstrel, "that Alacha should die, yet it has come to pass at another hand than mine."

Abruptly he ceased as Berang caught his shoulder, asking gruffly where he might find Abdul Dost. To the Tatar the death of a foe was a slight thing. But to the three others a tyrant had crumbled into dust, and Tala and Chan stared wide-eyed, even in their triumph.

The minstrel pointed to the dark blotches of groves beyond the river, and to the distant summits of rolling hillocks half-veiled in the shimmering moonlight.

"Yonder lie the Afghan lines," he said. "Stay—I will guide you; two horses have I seized, that I might ride——"

He had the gift of tongue, and Berang understood readily. He asked the position of the Mogul's lines, but Chan knew little of this. As they talked, Nur-Jahan stepped to the side of the dead noble, wondering slightly at the swift course of fate that had driven the ambitious, the ready-witted Alacha down into the shadows. His handsome face was turned up to the sky, the full mouth twisted in pain.

"*Tamam shud*," she murmured. "(That is finished.)"

The thought came to her to escape while the others talked, yet on the instant the Mongol gripped her shoulder.

"I will take the woman of the prince," he growled, "to tell us what secrets she may. If she will not, torture will loose her tongue."

Whereupon without glancing at the cold beauty of Nur-Jahan he swung her upon one of the horses brought thither by Tala. The girl and the minstrel mounted the other and led the way along the path, Berang bringing up impatiently in the rear.

When they had passed beyond the turn in the trail, the terrace before the cavern was very quiet for a space. An owl hooted in the scrub trees near by, and suddenly there was a rush of wings, a dart of powerful talons, and the feathered assassin of the night descended upon the face of the dead man.

The talons struck and tore, yet the great bird sprang away, its pallid eyes gleaming. It had felt the rending of flesh under its claws, yet it flew away, knowing that the dead thing had been a man.

And straightway there was a rustle on the lower path; the bushes parted, and Gutchluk peered about the glade. Seeing Alacha, the *shaman* ran forward, looking cautiously over his shoulder. He knelt, muttering:

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"Exalted lord, harken to the message of thine humble servitor. I have run but now from the camp of thy foes. At dawn, the dawn after tomorrow, will Abdul Dost attack with all his force— My lord, harken——"

Gutchluk bent closer, thinking that Alacha slept, and so gained full sight of the cold face, streaked with dark talon-marks, of the sightless eyes staring up at him.

With a gasp that ended in a muttering cry the spy of Alacha scrambled to his feet, looked down wildly and fled away along the trail, his dark robe clinging to outstretched arms.

Very much like a huge bat he seemed, winging its way upon the earth.

So the Slayer lay dead on the turf of the place where he had come, as to the eye of the mountain. Yet the plot that he had begun, the deceit he had formulated, the treachery he had fostered—all these lived.

Because of Alacha the mission of Nur-Jahan to make peace between the hereditary foes was fruitless. Abdul Dost had been tricked.

In the books of wisdom of the Moslems it is written that the dark *ferrash* strikes and a sultan dies, passing like as a drop of water from the surface of the desert. But the fruits of the tree of evil do not pass away.

Because of Alacha the prophecy of the blind Muhammad Asad was to come to pass, and the valley of Badakshan was to be filled with the bones of men.

ALL Berang's haste could not undo the harm that had been done. He found the Afghan camp astir with preparation. Sentries challenged sharply at every goat-path of the upper plain, bodies of horse moved slowly into position beside the river or occupied villages.

Foot soldiers—the mass of the Afghan force—furbished shields and simitars and watched for dawn. Wounded men bandaged their hurts. Women and children, thronging in from the near-by hills, brought milk and meal-cakes.

The Afghans had tasted battle. They were entering battle at the side of their families and remaining flocks, camped in a large village, almost under the Hindu-Kush.

Abdul Dost was silent, hearing the tale of the deceit that had been practised upon him—for Berang quickly identified himself as the true messenger sent by Khlit. His forehead flushed hotly.

"Draw back your men, Afghan," advised Berang bruskly. "The wisdom of the Kha Khan must be obeyed. He may not reach here before a night and a day and another night and day."

The *mansabdar* looked around at the circle of his leader's faces, glowing in the firelight before his tent, and shook his head. Every face was exultant, for the news of Berang's coming had been passed through the ranks swiftly.

"The Mongols near the end of the passes," the tidings had gone forth. "The Horde has come from the steppe."

"I can not hold back my men—now," said Abdul Dost harshly to Berang.

"Did ye not believe the word of the Kha Khan that he would come?"

"I believed. Yet for the space of thrice ten days have my men seen the smoke of their houses, and their flocks slain, to fester in the fields, their children coursed down and their women taken to the lust of the Mogul's soldiery."

Berang swore roundly under his shaggy mustache. Implicitly he trusted Khlit, and to have the Kha Khan's advice set aside on whatever grounds was blasting.

Abdul Dost thrust his lean, scarred face close to the Mongol.

"Eh, Tatar," he growled. "I and my Afghans will hold the ranks of the Mogul in battle so long as may be. Get you hence, to Khlit. Tell him what you have learned and say that by the ninety and nine holy names of Allah I thank him—I and my men, for his coming. Bid him make what speed he may to the battle——"

He broke off, resuming his seat by the fire. Abdul Dost was too experienced a warrior to share the unthinking exultation of his men, and he knew well the true strength of the imperial army.

He knew likewise that it was hopeless for him to try to postpone the conflict further. Not only would it dishearten his men and perhaps scatter them to abandon the last position they had taken, but an attempt to do so would be useless. The Afghans had made their last ablutions, before battle.

So Berang spat upon the earth and sprang to horse. An Afghan caught at his bridle-rein.

"Warrior of the Horde," he cried, "in which quarter will the Kha Khan strike when he comes? What is his plan, of which you speak?"

"The *tulughma*—the Mongol swoop," Berang made answer. "And no one save the Kha Khan knows in what quarter it will come."

So he galloped away, muttering to keep his rendezvous with Khlit, and with him went Chan as guide, and Tala with Chan. The minstrel still kept Nur-Jahan at his side watchfully. Tala, yielding to the plea of the Persian, who shrank from having her face exposed to the gaze of the soldiery, had procured for her fellow Moslem a veil. Thus the presence of Nur-Jahan was unnoticed and unsuspected in the excitement.

She rode through the darkness, the bridle of her horse in Tala's hand, and slept as she rode.

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CHAPTER XII

THE LORD THUNDER-THROWER LAUGHS

SHORTLY after morning prayers on the next day a mounted messenger from the Mogul bearing a jeweled sword to Paluwan Khan and another to Raja Man Singh—as presents on the eve of battle—passed swiftly through the village of Anderab which served as the base of supplies for the army of the ameers.

Here mobs of porters, *dak* runners, wrestlers, palanquin-bearers, gathered to gaze on the imperial messenger. Painted women, followers of the army, peered out from behind the screens of upper balconies; drivers of beasts looked up from the pens by the road indifferently.

Caravaneers, striding in the dust behind lines of long-haired camels, cursed him under their breath, bending their heads abjectly the while, or springing aside to escape his horse's hoofs. Hangers-on, conjurers, astrologers, blacksmiths, came to the opening of their booths or huts to gaze.

"The battle is on," they said. "Soon the Afghan army will be no more."

The emissary made haste during the forenoon along the road to Talikan, the headquarters of the ameers. Soon he began to pass powder-trains, idle camels of the falcon-gun artillery, and guard-posts. Camps of irregular horse, waiting until the crisis of the battle be past before venturing on the field, lined the road.

The streets of Talikan were filled with bands of captives, roped, laboring at carrying supplies and water-sacks, with troops of sick men clustered under awnings, with slaves and the idle horses of the Rajput cavalry which formed the third line of battle.

The messenger passed the Rajput warriors, grouping into their clans, streaking their faces with turmeric, drinking, singing and laughing.

Here the ground was tilled fields, trampled by thousands of hoofs, and a mass of mud by the river-bank. The tents had been struck and sent to the rear. Squadrons of horse, mailed and fully armed, waited in the fields.

An arrow's flight ahead of them stretched the long line of foot, pikemen, household troops —Uzbeks, Turks and Punjabis facing the north. Also the Portuguese mercenaries—matchlock-men, in solid ranks.

They faced the foremost line—the cannon. Here the Lord Thunder-Thrower had stationed carts and piles of baggage in squares, between which were stakes driven into the ground and from the stakes to the carts long leather bands, with iron chains, at the height of a man's waist above ground.

At intervals along the chains were the *feringha*, the heavy brass artillery that was the joy of the Lord Thunder-Thrower. In the carts and grouped on the flanks were the lighter pieces.

One flank—the left—rested upon a mass of hillocks, rocky, broken ground, and the other—the right—upon the river.

So in two days had the ameers of Jahangir arrayed themselves for battle. They received the messenger at the foremost tent just behind the infantry, where the elephants were placed—huge beasts, armored on head and fore quarters, their howdahs bristling with archers. Paluwan Khan girded on the new sword with his old one, and smiled.

"Tarry, honored sir," he bellowed at the messenger, "and you will see the Afghan host go to —— by way of the flashing simitar. Alacha, who had vanished like a dream of the night, was to tell us the time of the rebels' onset, but we are ready mustered, and await but the hour."

Raja Man Singh pointed to the clouds of Afghan riders clustered not more than a gun-shot away and urged an attack by his cavalry. The Lord Thunder-Thrower threw back his head and laughed long.

"Stay, my gentle scion of Marwar! Let these agile riders taste of my *feringha* balls and iron chains, cleverly hidden by sheaves of wheat, and of the rockets and blast of the falcon pieces—then may you cut them up as a sharp sword cuts a trussed sheep."

This was roughly the plan of the ameers. Their numbers were somewhat more than those of the Afghans—about twelve thousand as opposed to nine thousand. More potent by far than numbers was the advantage in weapons, in cannon and in discipline.

Throughout that day the ameers feasted the envoy and listened to reports of skirmishes between the lines. Raja Man Singh fretted when the Afghans rode before the Mogul position, crying challenges. Paluwan Khan smiled.

"Would you loose the prisoned wolf from the pen, raja? Alacha has tricked the ill-omened ones into a decision to attack, and then——"

He broke off with a scowl.

"In the name of Allah the All-wise, where is the Slayer? After some woman, it is likely——"

He shrugged his shoulders and arranged to assume command of the Turkoman's followers himself. This caused some necessary confusion and had its effect later.

During that day and night the length and breadth of the camp was searched for Alacha without result. At dawn Paluwan Khan and Raja Man Singh were in sole command of the Mogul's forces.

And at dawn the first ranks of Afghans threw themselves against the foe.

ALMOST Ra'd-andaz Khan, the Lord Thunder-Thrower, master cannoneer, was taken by surprize. There was barely light enough to make out the dark groups of hillmen advancing over the fields.

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Paluwan Khan's outposts were driven in swiftly, and at first silently—for the Afghans crept up on the sentries and slew them. Shouts resounded, kettle-drums were beaten and steel weapons clashed.

Running swiftly, the Afghans surrounded and cut down mounted pickets of the ameers and rushed upon the staked line of the Thunder-Thrower. Here and there a falcon gun bellowed and flashed in the half-light of early morning.

The Afghan van, picked from the tribes by Abdul Dost for this desperate venture, never reached the line of stakes. The leather ropes and steel chains were lowered at certain points and squadrons of irregular horse under the lieutenants of Paluwan Khan issued forth, checking the clamorous Afghans and cutting them up.

Whereupon the Lord Thunder-Thrower swore a pleased oath and hastened to his guns, flaming match in hand. The imperial standard was raised in front of the tents of the ameers, and Raja Man Singh ran from his pavilion in time to see the solid mass of Afghan cavalry led by Abdul Dost follow forward upon the heels of the broken infantry screen.

The Mogul's irregulars, their task half-performed, scattered—some to the wings and some back through the breaks in the staked line which were fast being closed. Simitars flashing and cloaks flying, the Afghans charged, crying shrilly:

"*Allah akbar! Ho—Allah—ho!*"

The roaring of the *feringha* answered them as the Lord Thunder-Thrower and his cannoneers touched matches to the bronze breeches of the heavy artillery. Fiery rockets charged with powder were flung high into the air by the Mogul's men, to fall among the horses of the attacking ranks. Pikemen dressed their weapons behind the chains.

Wide gaps were opened among the Afghans by the blast of the *feringha*, and the rockets set horses to plunging. Yet the Afghans cared not whether their lines be ordered; they swept onward, slaying the few irregulars who had tarried too long to plunder the fallen.

Horses screamed in pain as they were thrown against the pikes that stretched behind the chains; cloaked figures sprang from saddle and across the chains, weapon in hand. Here and there the impact of mounted riders snapped the cords of bulls' hide, and horsemen rode through shouting and smiting.

And as they did so there came the steady reports of the weapons of the Portuguese matchlock-men stationed behind the guns, their pieces resting upon wooden supports. Matchlock balls pierced through mail shirt and quilted corselet, sending riders here and there plunging to earth.

"Now will the Rajput clans mount for attack," cried Raja Man Singh, fingering his drawn weapon.

Ra'd-andaz Khan, striding through the confusion, gripped his arm. The Turk's broad face was smoke-blackened, but his smile was as wide as ever.

"My men will deal with these dogs," he shouted. "Save your sword for a second brood. Abdul Dost has more in store."

And as he had guessed the Afghans withdrew from the staked line slowly, their strength sadly broken by the cannon and the pikes. For a space quiet held the bank of the Oxus—a quiet broken by the moans of the wounded. At noon Abdul Dost knelt on his prayer carpet, his men doing likewise. It was the hour of midday prayer.

"God is great," they chanted, lifting burning eyes to the clear sky. "There is no God but God——"

Straightway they launched their main attack—first mounted archers that wheeled and sent arrow-flights speeding among the men behind the staked line, then a solid mass of five thousand Afghans, mad with the lust of conflict.

"Alacha has contrived well," muttered Paluwan Khan, picking up his shield and signing to Raja Man Singh.

The sweep of the Afghans carried them through and over the cannon, casting the *feringha* to earth after one bellow—for these giant pieces could be loaded and discharged but once during the attack. They slew the defenders of the bullock carts and surrounded the Lord Thunder-Thrower's men—that official having prudently retired behind the cavalry, his task performed.

And now the watchers on the housetops of Talikan saw the dark forms of the armored elephants move forward, sun glinting upon the arrows that sped from the howdahs. These beasts, veritable moving castles, advanced among the Afghans, who engaged them desperately, the warriors dismounting and attacking the bellies of the elephants with knives and hacking at the flailing trunks with their simitars.

Paluwan Khan, sitting within a swaying howdah, gazed forth upon a struggling mass of men and horses, stretched from the river to the distant hillocks, and caused his standard to be lifted as a signal for Raja Man Singh to attack with the Rajputs.

A shout resounded above the tumult and the fluttering garments of the Rajput clans appeared charging upon the flanks and center of the embattled ranks.

Whereupon there was a glad clamor of trumpet and cymbals from the onlookers at Talikan, and the camp-followers began to run forward to seek the spoil for which they had been waiting.

Slowly, inexorably, the elephants plowed

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forward as the Afghan riders gave back. The fresh troops of Raja Man Singh cleared the flanks of foemen, and the Lord Thunder-Thrower turned to the imperial envoy who watched at his side—a safe distance from the fighting.

"Speed with word to Jahangir, my lord," cried Ra'd-andaz Khan. "Say that by Allah's aid the servants of the World-Gripper are driving the evil ones of dark fortunes to death and captivity, and by nightfall a mound of skulls will be erected to the glory of the Monarch of the Earth. Speed!"

And the envoy, nothing loath, mounted, knowing that a truly regal gift would be his for the bringing of such tidings.

In this manner is the message inscribed in the annals of Jahangir. Yet of what followed in the battle of Badakshan naught is said. Perhaps this is because of those who saw the battle some said one thing, some another, and still others, being dead, had naught to say. Yet chiefly is it because the Mogul wrote down only those things which added to the glory of his reign, and, being outwardly a follower of the Prophet, would not give belief to the tale that powers other than human fought against his ameers that day.

FOR into the ranks of the Afghans spurred a huge figure, clad in rough sheepskins, smiting aside those of the imperial riders who opposed him with a sword as great as a man's thigh.

Seeking out Abdul Dost, sitting grim-eyed upon his horse in the center of his men, this stranger cried:

"Word to the Afghan leader from his ally. Give back! Seek safety. Draw back to the mountains, Afghan, and give place to the Mongol."

Quickened hope caused Abdul Dost to turn and gaze back at the fields and woods in his rear, at the scattered villages through which bodies of horsemen fought, Rajput and Afghan alike, to the valleys that led down from the mountains to the north. Yet he saw no others than his own men, and the slain that sprinkled the fields.

"Come you from Khlit?" he asked harshly.

"Aye, the Kha Khan."

"He has passed the mountain barrier? He comes to the battle?"

"Aye. He grants the Horde a space to breath deep and eat. He has seen the course of the battle from the mountainside, and he bids you draw back if you have faith in him, for he can not leave his men to come to you."

The Tatar rider glanced around at the tumult.

"Ho, Afghan, give place to the Mongol!"

Crying his war-shout, the warrior spurred his horse into the struggling groups before him, hewing mightily with his sword, and was lost to view among the enemy.

And Abdul Dost, fighting doggedly, drew back to his own camp in the Afghan village. Here his men gathered together the whole of their remaining strength, and, with women and boys in the ranks, resisted the advance of the Rajputs, refusing to retreat farther and determined to die if need be upon the field.

The *mansabdar* remained with his men, who were soon surrounded in the village by the forces under Raja Man Singh.

Thus the intrigue of Alacha and the strategy of Paluwan Khan had overcome the Afghans. To drive home the victory Raja Man Singh prepared to administer the last blow, sure of himself and the strength at his command.

"What care I for new foes?" he laughed when warned of the appearance of a Mongol among the Afghans. "The field is in our hands, and the spirit heroes, nay, the gods themselves, could not drive our army back from its conquest."

CHAPTER XIII

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

AS KHLIT brought the last of his men through the lower passes of the Hindu Kush, after sunrise of the day of the battle, above the plain of Badakshan and overlooking the winding course of the Oxus, they rode through a flurry of snow and hail and passed from under storm-clouds.

For the last day and night the Horde had not halted to rest or to sleep. Those who still had extra horses rode these until they dropped, saving the better ones as best they might. Under Khlit's driving the Tatars had made the journey of a hundred miles over the ravines in twenty-four hours. Now at the place where Berang waited Khlit commanded that they dismount and kill such spare horses as remained in order that they might eat.

From the broad valley underfoot came the rumble of cannon and the dull murmur that told the veteran warriors a battle was on, although they could see nothing of the field itself, being deep in the pine forest at the headwaters of the Oxus.

Berang, however, had climbed a tree farther down the valley and had made out much of the conflict, especially what had taken place by the river which ran directly down from the pass; being but a slender stream at that point.

"We must hasten," he growled to Khlit, "for good sword-strokes are dealt yonder, and it is my thought that the Afghans ride to defeat, for their ranks are broken."

"The men must eat," Khlit answered, and the Tatars stretched themselves on the ground under the pines, while some kindled fires.

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The faces of all were blackened by exposure and lined with fatigue. The bleared eyes were dull, and the thick-set, powerful bodies swayed as they moved afoot, for they had lived in the saddle during the greater part of a week, and the cessation of continued motion bewildered them.

Yet they chuckled, staring at each other and their leader. They had come over the passes where Genghis Khan had been before them, and they were looking down upon India.

Some scooped up handfuls of the snow for themselves, but carefully led their shaggy beasts—the steppe ponies, possessed of the iron-like endurance of their masters—to the streams that ran into the Oxus to drink.

Khlit leaned upon his saddle-peak, his brown face the color of the saddle itself, his sheepskin coat bound close to his body. While Berang talked, he listened intently.

Savagely he shook his head, hearing of the first assault of the Afghans and their repulse. He knew the strength of the Mogul's army, and its manner of fighting.

"We are late, late," he murmured. "Would I could see Abdul Dost. Ha, Berang, tell me the lie of the land."

The khan sought out Chan, and the minstrel, who knew the plain of Badakshan like a book, described it to the Cossack, who memorized every detail with painstaking care, glancing the while at his men, who ate wolfishly by the fires, and, having eaten, fell instantly into sleep.

"Talikan!" broke in Khlit. "The rearmost village—there be captives therein? The spare horse-herds of the Rajputs?"

"I have heard talk of Afghan prisoners laboring there, my lord," responded the boy, then looked up brightly. "We also have a captive my lord—a noblewoman—and she may be made to tell you what you would know."

At the Cossack's impatient nod he hurried back among the trees and presently appeared with Tala, leading the horse whereon sat the veiled Nur-Jahan.

The Persian held herself proudly erect, gazing mutely at the masses of uncouth warriors moving hither and thither among their horses. She was very pale, and her dark eyes were bright. Khlit barely glanced at her, not recognizing the empress-to-be in the lone woman dressed in the woolen robes of a commoner.

"How many Afghan prisoners are in Talikan?" he barked. "How many guards?"

"I know not."

Something in her voice caused the old warrior to look at her sharply.

"Ha, woman, fail not to speak!"

"I know not."

"You have seen the numbers of the Mogul's army—what numbers?"

"As many as the head leaves underfoot, or the stones in the river-bed."

At this Berang muttered an oath and drew sword. He stepped to Nur-Jahan's side and grasped her hair in a mighty hand.

"Speak or die."

The form of the woman stiffened and her eyelids fluttered. She lowered her eyes, keeping silence.

"What name bears she?" Khlit turned to Chan.

"Lord, we know not. Because of her, Berang, your man, slew Alacha. I heard her say that she was called the Light of the World; but that surely was madness."

"Lord," Tala put in, bending her dark head, "I know not if it be madness, for this princess is of Ispahan, and she said to me in the Mogul camp that she would contrive peace between Afghan and Mogul. Then Alacha had her carried away. Not once but many times she spoke as Nur-Jahan, and great is her pride."

The keen eye of the Afghan girl had read much truth in the unveiled features of Nur-Jahan. Khlit reined his horse forward until his shaggy head was close to the eyes of the captive woman.

"SPEAK, witless one," he growled. "Tell the numbers that Raja Man Singh holds as reserve. Where lie they? In Talikan? With the prisoners?"

When the Persian remained silent he snatched the veil from her head, and muttered in his beard.

"Aye, you are Nur-Jahan. Once I carried you safely from Khoten to Kashmir, to your lord, the Mogul. And now, forgetting that, he has put a price upon my head. Speak, for here it matters not whether you be Nur-Jahan or slave."

The woman shook her head mutely. But now Tala and Chan pressed forward, eyes agleam.

"O Kha Khan, know you the prize that you hold? Threaten her with the torture; send word to Raja Man Singh that Nur-Jahan will suffer for the wrongs of Badakshan——"

"Little Afghan—" Khlit spoke impatiently—"said you not that the Light of the World sought to bring about peace between your people and the Mogul—and failed? How may she succeed now, when the battle is on? The ameers will have no thought for a woman. They follow their own path—" he nodded toward the plain below—"and twice ten thousand warriors are deaf to words."

"Then," cried Berang and others of the khans, "let her suffer until she voices the tidings you would know."

He bent back the fair head of the captive with a twist of his wrist, and the others muttered hoarse approval. Khlit glanced once searchingly into the strained face of the Persian and caught Berang's arm, thrusting it aside.

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"She is Nur-Jahan, and she will not speak. Brothers, khans, are ye dotards and fools to wage war upon the body of one woman?"

He looked from man to man, his gray eyes hard under the shaggy brows.

They scowled at each other and fingered their weapons.

"Content you, Kha Khan," they barked. "We follow where you lead. Take us therefore to this horde of India—minions of the false prince sired by the great Genghis."

Khlit glanced briefly a last time at Nur-Jahan.

"Ha, woman of the Mogul, you shall bear the tidings to your lord. Say that the Tatars yield you back to him—unharmed. Tell him of the Mongol swoop, and the events that come to pass this day."

So speaking, he gave Nur-Jahan into the care of Chagan, the mighty sword-bearer, bidding Chan also ride with her until she should be given over safely nto the care of some Mogul noble. This done, he looked hastily at the sun, noting likewise that the tumult on the plain below seemed to have died out somewhat—for Abdul Dost had drawn back from his first charge—and ordered the kettle-drums sounded for assembly.

Throughout the forest in the gorge swarthy Tatars sprang up, cursing stiffened limbs, and mounted. The khans lifted their standards and rode forward, striking aside those in their way, until they reached Khlit's side.

The Cossack signed for them to follow and led the way forward for some distance until the gorge fell away and a wide stream appeared at their feet. Berang pointed out the hillock whence he had observed the opening of the battle, and on this spot Khlit faced his khans.

He indicated the course of the stream, widening to a small, shallow river down by the battle-field to the south, and pointed to the distance on the right, where some five miles away miniature groups of men moved slowly about the plain and the smoke of burning huts rose into the air. Faintly they could make out the dark line that was the Mogul's front, against the river bank.

"There we must be with utmost speed, brothers, khans," he said quietly. "How?"

"Let us ride to the Afghan horde," muttered Berang. "They be sore pressed. Aye, what else?"

Khlit looked at him impassively.

"We be but one against five of the Mogul's men. Our Horde is thinned by death in the passes. Already you have said the Afghans are beaten back, having men to three times our number. By joining the Afghans we would swell their number—true—but avail nothing more."

"Let us then ride forward alone against the Mogul," bellowed an old Tatar, his thin white mustache hanging to his naked chest, blackened by the sun. "Aye, to slay mightily, as is fitting——"

"Then would we be but one against five, and five that are facing us, ready for an onset——"

"The flank, then," cried another, pointing to the right.

"There the ground is too rough for horses."

Khlit lifted his hand.

"Hear me, brothers, khans. A way there is to double our numbers and to charge over fair ground and to strike where we are not looked for. We will ride in the *tulughma*, the Mongol swoop."

"Ho, that is good hearing," nodded the khans, their fierce eyes gleaming. "Aye, that is good."

"By inspiring fear, brothers, khans, we will make greater our numbers. And we will be feared when we strike where no foe is looked for."

Khlit still held them with his eyes.

"Yet by so doing we will cut ourselves off from escape—verily, there will be no hope if we fail. Mightily will we slay, yet death will follow us fast. Will you come with me?"

As one man the Tatars made answer.

"Lead, by Natagai's blood—lead. By the hide of the gods, lead us on, Kha Khan. We be wearied of talk."

Just a little Khlit smiled under his mustache, glancing calmly at the ring of faces. It was a moment of pride for the old warrior. Three thousand men and more had followed him over half a thousand miles of mountain land, enduring the while hardships that no army of India, Russia, Persia or China would have faced. He had done what the ameers of the Mogul, as Chan had related, had said that no man could do—and what the Afghans had feared could not be done. And now, without sight of friend or foe, the survivors of these men would follow him blindly into what seemed to him to be certain death for the most part, if not for all.

Then it was that Khlit sent the warrior—him of the bare shoulders and white hair—headlong to Abdul Dost, bearing the command to draw back from the battle to where the Afghan forces would be safe and leave the field to the Tatars.

Thus Khlit hoped to make good his promise to Abdul Dost. He was under no illusions as to what his own fate might be.

"Yet," he muttered to himself as he led the van of his riders across the stream to the farther bank, opposite the plain of battle, and turned swiftly to the south down a shallow valley pointed out by Chan, "when my sword is broken and my men are wearied or slain, the army of Jahangir will be an army no more."

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IN THE scattered hamlets along the left bank of the river, the villagers, old men, and the women and children who had been staring across the shallow bosom of the Oxus—the watchers turned in amazement, perceiving that dark masses of horsemen rode down the valley behind them to the south. They heard a steady thunder of hoofs, and saw harsh faces and the glint of steel through clouds of dust.

"*Ai!*" they cried. "The tales of the hillmen were true. Verily there are spirits of the heights afoot."

Being frightened and superstitious, they thought this—having seen no men like the Tatars.

The Horde passed steadily athwart the battle lines on the farther side of the Oxus, and children in the fields, bending in the midday prayer wherein they besought aid for the Afghans, stared round-eyed as the riders trampled through wheat-fields burned by Alacha's men, and behind thickets of willows, cypress and tamarisk that screened them from observation by the Mogul's forces.

Chan, called forward by Khlit, served as guide. Here and there they encountered the skirmishing-parties flung out across the river by Paluwan Khan, and engulfed them. It was ever the way of the Horde to strike so swiftly that no news of their coming reached ahead.

They heard the distant roar of conflict as Abdul Dost flung his men forward in the noon charge, before Khlit's messenger could find him in the affray.

Khlit looked up somewhat anxiously at this. But his lean face was tranquil. He smelled once more the smoke of battle, heard the impact of charging ranks. A great peace held his mind, and he smiled.

His thoughts went back to the steppes, to the Ukraine and Tartary, where he had gone forward like this, but at the head of shouting Cossacks against the Turk and the Pole. Like this he had passed down the bank of the Volga, the Dneiper—aye, and the Kerulon, in the homeland of the Tatars.

He wondered how the old chiefs of Cossackdom had fared during the years after he had left the war encampments. He would have liked to see their faces again, hear their oaths and see the glitter of their swords. Yet he knew his old companions were dead.

So likewise had the elder khans of Tartary passed from his life, Chepe Noyon and the others—their souls loosed from their bodies in the swift tide of battle.

Only Abdul Dost remained.

Khlit's life had been long and full. He had chosen the open plains and the hard fortunes of war instead of the peace of cities and the honors of the courts. No comfort had he won out of life, nor had he gained anything to serve him except his sword. He had seen the coming of a new era, of wide-flung empires and far-venturing ships, and his friends had been the last of a warrior race—in Cossackdom and Tartary. . . .

"Kha Khan—" Chan broke into his thoughts—"we come to the ford that leads to Talikan."

"Lift high the yak-tail standard," shouted Khlit, rising in his stirrups. "Sound the *nacars*—Berang, take the Torgots across the river—Chagan, abide with me—brothers, khans, assemble your men into the clans and let each one look to me for orders. Draw your swords, brothers, khans."

In silence, until they gained midway across the stream, the Torgot clan rode. Debouching from twin clumps of willows, they were not noticed at first by the Mogul's forces holding the village, who had heard that the Afghans were driven back. And even when espied the Tatars were at first taken for some fresh body of imperial cavalry.

Not until the strange aspect of Berang's men was noted did the scattered troops in Talikan take alarm. By then the Tatars were riding through the streets.

Without difficulty they drove the ill-armed and unprepared detachments in Talikan before them, striking down all who bore arms. The tide of the Horde swept across the river, trampled down the river-bank bazaars, sending the wondering inhabitants scurrying indoors.

So suddenly had they appeared that rumors began to fly toward the rearmost lines of the ameers.

"Demons out of purgatory have sprung from the ground. . . . Men came out of the river and laid waste Talikan. . . . They are like to wild beasts and no man may face them."

Thus the message came to Paluwan Khan, sitting his elephant in the midst of his scattered foot-soldiery, and to Raja Man Singh, who pressed the attack on all sides against the Afghan camp where Abdul Dost had rallied his men.

At Talikan Khlit remounted half his followers from the spare horses of the Rajputs. Seeking out the Afghan prisoners and scattering their guards, he ordered them to mount the horses discarded by the Tatars and to arm themselves from weapons cast upon the ground by fugitives and from the stores of the ameers. The village itself he fired, and a giant column of smoke soon rose against the sky, causing the imperial forces on the field of battle to glance back and wonder.

Reforming his clans at the remount camp of the Rajputs, now emptied of guards, Khlit gave his men only scant breathing-space before leading them forward.

This time he altered his column into a fan-shaped formation, the standard in the center. Before advancing he summoned a Rajput

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noble, wounded, who had been spared by Berang. Pointing out the still figure of Nur-Jahan, he bade the man escort her out of the conflict.

"Take her to Jahangir, raja," he said grimly. "Say to the World-Gripper that his empress has a braver heart than he—and is more faithful to a friend. Go!"

He did not even watch the noble take the bridle of Nur-Jahan's horse and lead it back through the village, stumbling onward in mute amazement. Yet his words were afterward to prove true. Nur-Jahan was the heart and the brains of Jahangir's reign.

And now came youths and old men running from houses here and there, crying:

"Allah be praised! Aid is come for the Afghans. We will go with the Tatar Horde."

These Khlit ordered curtly back, but took the freed prisoners with him, some running at the stirrups of his men. Broken by torture and fatigue, the Afghans ran on, silently nursing their longing for revenge.

Within the space of a few moments the Horde had reached the main camp of the Mogul's forces and cleared it of defenders. The fugitives ran to Paluwan Khan crying that the Mongols were upon them, and their coming added to the general confusion that had ensued upon the heels of the temporary victory of the ameers.

But Paluwan Khan, cursing mightily, formed his battalions to face the rear and sent a rider speeding to Raja Man Singh with urgent summons to draw back to aid him. The movements of the Tatars had been so swift and their change of mounts so quickly accomplished that the tale of their numbers had grown.

"Fetch back your cannon!" roared Paluwan Khan at the Thunder-Thrower. "Where are your pikemen? Send me the leader of the Portuguese infidels! In the name of Allah, form your ranks!"

Before this could be done the Horde was among the main array of the ameers. The Tatars hitherto had met but the scourings of the camp, the bazaar hangers-on, servants, slaves and camp-followers. Now they gave a great shout at sight of the line of footmen drawn up behind pikes.

Chagan carried the yak-tail standard into the front of the attack, followed closely by Khlit, and a thousand horsemen, hewing, slashing and mad with the intoxication of battle had broken into the ranks of Paluwan Khan.

Short, broad swords smote the steel heads from pikes; flights of arrows sped over the foremost riders to fall thick among the men of Paluwan Khan. The imperial lines, disconcerted, broken, began to give back.

A second line of Tatars came forward, driving into the mêlée just as the elephants, or those that could be brought up from the engagement at the Afghan camp, came plodding forward, their howdahs a-bristle with archers.

UNTIL now Khlit had made full use of the advantage gained by the *tulughma*—the encircling movement that was the favorite stratagem of Genghis Khan, who sent his cavalry from the rear of his own lines clear into the rear of the enemy.

He had reasoned that he would find the forces of the ameers scattered and in part disorganized after the affray with the Afghans. In advancing as he did into the heart of the Mogul's army he foresaw that he would meet with different detachments separately. Yet now he realized that the strength of the enemy had been barely touched by the reckless assaults of Abdul Dost upon a prepared defense.

And the huge elephants were veritable citadels of strength.

"Bid the clans," he shouted to the nearest warriors, "fight clear of the elephants—all but the beast bearing the standard of Paluwan Khan."

He pointed to the howdah of the Northern Lord, glittering with its costly trimmings.

"Chagan, take a score of followers and slay me that chief."

By now the arrows from the howdahs were flying among the Tatar riders, and their own arrows were deflected off the armored coverings of the beasts. Khlit rose to a standing position in his saddle and surveyed the masses of fighting men. He rode swiftly from clan to clan, bidding them draw away from the riverbank. In so doing they passed near the elephant of Paluwan Khan.

Chagan had driven his horse at the head of the giant beast, clearing a path for himself with his sword. He swung at the black trunk that swayed above him, missed his stroke, and went down as his horse fell with an arrow in its throat.

"Bid your elephant kneel, cowardly lord," he bellowed, springing to his feet and avoiding the impact of the great tusks, "and fight as a man should!"

His companions being for the most part slain, Chagan seized a fresh mount that went by riderless and rode against the elephant's side. Gripping the canopy that overhung the elephant's back, with teeth and clutching fingers he drew himself up, heedless of blows delivered upon his steel headpiece and mailed chest.

"Ho!" he cried from between set teeth. "I will come to you, Northern Lord!"

An arrow seared his cheek and a knife in the hand of an archer bit into the muscles of a massive arm. Chagan's free hand seized the mahout and jerked him from behind the ears of the elephant as ripe fruit is plucked from a tree. At this the beast swayed and shivered,

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and for an instant the occupants of the howdah were flung back upon themselves and Chagan was nearly cast to earth.

Kneeling, holding on the howdah edge with a bleeding hand, he smote twice with his heavy sword, smashing the skull of an archer and knocking another to the ground. The remaining native thrust his shield before Paluwan Khan.

But the Northern Lord, no coward, pushed his servant aside and sprang at Chagan, simitar in hand.

The Tatar sword-bearer, kneeling, wounded, was at a disadvantage. Swiftly he let fall his own weapon and closed with Paluwan Khan, taking the latter's stroke upon his shoulder. A clutching hand gripped the throat of the Northern Lord above the mail and Chagan roared in triumph.

Pulling his foe free of the howdah, the Tatar lifted Paluwan Khan to his shoulder and leaped from the back of the elephant.

The two mailed bodies struck the earth heavily, Paluwan Khan underneath; and it was a long moment before Chagan rose, reeling. In his bleeding hand he clasped the head of the Northern Lord. And, reeling, he made his way to Khlit, through the watchers who had halted to view the struggle upon the elephant.

"Kha Khan, look upon your foe!"

And Chagan tossed the head aside, to run, staggering, at Khlit's stirrup as the Tatars swept athwart the Mogul's line, away from the river.

UNDER cover of arrow-flights discharged from horseback, the Tatar clans fell in behind their leaders, riding slowly, being reluctant to leave their foe.

"We have not quelled them, lord," panted a one-eyed warrior at young Berang Khan. "Aye, more ride up. Why do we not slay them?"

"Peace!" roared Berang. "Still your clamorous tongues, dogs, and await your time."

Grumbling and glancing often back, the Tatars drew clear of the Mogul's main array, drawing ever to the hillocks, away from the river-bank. Khlit, watching shrewdly the movements of the fighting men, had seen that detachments of Rajputs were coming up from the beleaguered Afghans.

Moreover, the elephants were causing his Tatars sore hurt, and his men were wearied. So he led the Horde, once again asssembled in its hive-like entirety to what had been the left flank of Paluwan Khan, behind the broken, rocky ground, out into the plain. And here he bade his men dress their wounds and wait, under cover of the rising ground.

As they did so, from the grove and field of grain, from *nullah* and water-bed came groups of Afghan men and women who had concealed themselves during the battle, and these bore milk and goatskins of water to allay the thirst of the Tatars.

And more—groups of armed riders galloped up, leaderless, having been separated from the Afghans in the camp of Abdul Dost. Frightened herds of cattle were rushing about the fields behind the Tatars.

Khlit, standing on the uppermost rocks, the sun behind his back, was now facing the river. After passing through Talikan, the Mogul camp, and charging the rear of the main line of Paluwan Khan, he had turned aside and brought his men to the extreme flank of the enemy.

"Gather your men into their clans," he said briefly to the khans. "See that each one has arrows and a sword. Send riders to head those herds—" he pointed at the trampling cattle on the plain— "this way. Make haste."

Carefully he studied the forces of the Mogul a pistol-shot away. He saw that they were moving about, forming a new line to face him. Cannon were being brought up on camel-back. Some men tried to cut down the stout leather ropes bound to the stakes that now divided their own position—as Khlit was on their flank.

He saw mounted Rajputs riding through the multitude, and companies of mercenaries marching first here, then there.

"It is well," he smiled. "They have no leaders."

What had happened was this. Paluwan Khan until his death had commanded Alacha's men as well as his own. With both ameers lost only the *mansabdars* and company leaders remained with the exception of the Thunder-Thrower, who was swearing in his endeavor to make his pieces bear on the new position of the Tatars.

Khlit saw that some six thousand fighting men faced his own horsemen, who did not now number two thousand. And the elephants remained.

Though he longed to do so, he could not ride on to where the Afghans still fought Raja Man Singh, on his left, to the north behind several gullies and groves. For the ground there was broken, and he could not leave six thousand men, and elephants, close in his rear, to ride farther to the north.

But he smiled, seeing the masses of cattle driven up, and turned to Berang. "If the Mogul's men had advanced upon us here among the rocks the battle would be theirs," he growled. "Yet, having no leader, they held back. Now will we charge."

He cast a last glance to the north, wondering how Abdul Dost fared. Then he seized the standard from Chagan's weakened hand, shouting for the riders to head the cattle forward, toward the enemy and the river.

"Nay, lord," groaned the sword-bearer.

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"That is my task—to hold the standard——"

"Give back, Chagan," Khlit urged, "for you are half-slain."

But the sword-bearer spurred after him, reeling in the saddle. The Horde followed after the standard, their eyes fastened on the flying yak-tails, a mighty shout rumbling from their throats.

And before them went the frightened cattle.

Crash, and again *crash* came the blast of the *zam zan*, the cannon of the Lord Thunder-Thrower; and many cattle and some Tatars were blown to earth. Urging on their spent horses, rising high in their stirrups, sending arrows swiftly from their short bows—so that the sun glinted upon them as upon drops of rain—the Tatars charged home, riding in among the cattle, sweeping first to one side, then the other with their strange swords, hacking, wheeling, shouting.

The Portuguese mercenaries discharged their pieces and caught up their short swords fearfully; the men of the Lord Thunder-Thrower had time for but one blast of their light pieces—for the *feringha* could not be moved to face the Tatars; the imperial archers found their shafts fruitless against the swift, short bows of the Mongols.

"Allah turned his face from us," said a cannoneer of the Thunder-Thrower that night, speaking of the charge, "and the spirits of the air fought against us; since we had slain our foe and they had passed from our sight, yet they came again to be slain, and the cannonballs did not check them. Aye, they were like to the spirits of the dead, like to the Horde of Genghis, the terrible."

He had seen Chagan cut half in two by a sweep of a pike, yet strike down the man who held the pike, and grapple with a matchlockman who had turned to flee.

"We can not slay them!" cried an archer of the household troops, flinging down his bow. "Our shafts pass through them, but they do not fall. Wo—wo!"

"They be spirits of the air!" shrieked a wounded Punjabi, his turban falling over his bloody face. "The gods fight against us—the many-armed gods!"

Whereupon a cursing Rajput struck him down and rode forward at the Tatar standard until Berang spurred against him and he too went headlong to death, but valorously.

"Flee, flee!" cried a small, cloaked figure, running about among the horses' legs.

It was a shriveled man in a dirty purple cloak, fear blazoned on his black face. Gutchluk had sought safety in the Mogul's ranks, yet found it not.

"Flee!" bellowed a brawny Turk, flinging down his simitar and rushing toward the river.

Now after the Tatar charge came a curious array. Horseless Afghans, wearied and bloody, stumbled on; old men caught up weapons from the trampled fields; stripling youths shrilled their war-shout, plying bows and dashing nimbly among the embattled host—Chan the minstrel riding at their head and singing as he rode.

Khlit and the body-guard of the Tatars were fighting grimly about the standard when these new, strange friends slipped among the horses to their aid. The Cossack had chosen the moment well. He had not given the enemy time to form into orderly ranks; he had charged with the sun at his back and the river at the rear of the foe. He pressed on, his curved sword red, his eyes alert. And with the standard came the swarm of the Horde.

That stout Turk, the Thunder-Thrower, had forsaken his cannon in judicious foretaste of what was coming. Halting two slaves with him at his simitar-point, he beat a ponderous retreat and arrived panting at the muddy bank of the river.

Rushing into the water, he scrambled up, upon the shoulders of his slaves, grasping their hair.

"Now bear me across the water, jackals, or you die!" he muttered.

One man slipped and the Lord Thunder-Thrower subsided into the brown current of the Oxus, gasping, impregnating the water with a smell of musk. Seeing this the other native, eyes a-gleam, caught at him, wrenching the pearls from throat and turban.

"Aid me to swim, in the name of God!" roared the Turk.

But his follower had gone, swimming away among the other fugitives.

Then did the stout Thunder-Thrower espy a goatskin filled with air, floating upon the current—such a skin as the common natives used to ferry them from bank to bank—and upon this was a water-soaked, brown man, shriveled of face, his purple robe clinging to shrunken shoulders.

Gutchluk had fled before the Turk. In a moment the bulky master cannoneer had struck the *shaman* heavily on the side of the head, and Gutchluk sank back into the brown water, his fingers still clutching at the life-giving skin. The Thunder-Thrower wrenched away the groping hands and spurned Gutchluk with his foot, as the *shaman* disappeared under the surface.

THE Mogul ranks had been broken. Panic had seized the men of the Mogul. They cast away their arms and ran back to the river-bank. Here some tried to flee north and south in the mud, to be cut down by the Tatar horsemen. Others swam across the river—mainly horsemen.

Mailed Turks gathered into groups and rode

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desperately south into Talikan. Only the elephants and scattered Rajputs held the field for the footmen had been the first to flee.

Against the elephants Khlit ordered huge fagots, torn from the defenses of the Thunder-Thrower, to be carried, flaming. The Tatar archers shot arrows into the necks of the huge beasts, and soon the elephants were retreating trumpeting, into the river, or running amuck south to Talikan.

The sun was now setting, and the fight had become a shambles.

Talikan and the Mogul camp were burning. Khlit sounded the *nacars* and assembled a remnant of his men, others joining him as he advanced forward again, north along the river toward the Afghan camp. His men reeled in their saddles from weariness; some slept as they rode; no one shouted or sang, save the Afghan boys and men who had aided them.

"On to Abdul Dost!" they cried.

In the smoky twilight the array of the Horde drew near the Afghan village, where Raja Man Singh saw them and gathered his Rajputs about him. Some three thousand good men he had, of the Marwar clan, of Oudipur and Sindh. The Rajput code of honor would not permit him to withdraw from the field.

And then the sun sank, plunging the plain of Badakshan with its hideous carpet of dead, the dark flood of the river Oxus and the overhanging hills into gloom—save for where flames soared into the sky from the bazaars of Talikan and the tents of the Mogul; and in the light of the fires Afghan children and wounded Tatars plundered the riches of the ameers.

In the deepening twilight the Afghans issued from their lines—the lines they still held at the village—and joined the Tatars. United, they sought the Rajputs in the dark.

Here was no orderly charge of mounted ranks, but a hand-to-hand struggle, fierce and silent, except for the clash of steel and the cry of the stricken. Men moved numbly over the plain, and oftentimes foemen stared at each other in the gloom, too wearied to strike. But always the Rajputs were pressed away from the river and the Afghan village, into the plain, fighting until they could fight no more.

By moonrise the battle-field was cleared, and dark bodies of riders passed far afield into the plain, some fleeing, some pursuing. Raja Man Sing was carried away bodily by two servants, his sword lost and he himself wounded. It was many days before the Rajput clans re-formed their ranks, broken by the Tatars.

"Lord of the World, Monarch of the Universe," the Lord Thunder-Thrower made plaint subsequently to the Mogul, "I did assemble some forces beyond the river, but demons pursued us through the night, and *ghils* shrieked at us in the moonlight. They followed, nor could we lose them."

"The gods walked the earth again that night," chattered a native soldier.

"Nay," said another; "I heard the trumpets of Genghis Khan, and the tramp of his host in the air."

Thus was the battle won and lost in Badakshan. And the broken army of the Mogul withdrew from Badakshan, leaving the Afghans free. Some said that forces more than human had fought against the Mogul; others, that intrigue and treachery had planted the fear of the coming of the Horde in the breast of the Mogul's men, and that they heard and saw naught but the image of their own fears in the moonlight. The mullahs of the north declared that the sins of the ameers had worked their undoing.

For how otherwise, asked the mullahs could the imperial army be routed by a small band of Tatars who came from nowhere and who went—nowhere?

Yet no one knew that a master of cavalry tactics had outgeneraled the ameers of the Mogul by a maneuver as old as the campaigns of Genghis, and had outfought six times his numbers with men who had not their match upon horses.

Khlit had drawn back from the pursuit at moonrise to seek for Abdul Dost in the Afghan camp. He walked a spent horse alone into the rows of fallen tents from fire to fire, holding a broken sword clasped in his hand.

He did not go far alone. Men and women who had thronged to the camp fell in behind his horse. Chan rode up, singing, followed by a group of Afghan youths chanting their victory.

"Where is Abdul Dost?" asked Khlit.

At this the singing was silenced. Torches came, and the gathering throng passed with him to the center of the Afghan lines, where the torches grouped themselves about a figure in armor prone on the ground—the armor slashed and bloodied, and the lean, dark face very harsh in the moonlight. The Afghan khans and their women and children looked on as Khlit dismounted stiffly, for he also was wounded.

By the side of Abdul Dost squatted a white-robed figure in a clean turban, bearing a staff in his hand, and by his knee was a slim boy. Muhammad Asad stared up into the sky from his blind eyes, his lips murmuring gentle prayers, but the boy whispered something into the ear of Abdul Dost.

The *mansabdar* glanced up and smiled.

"It was a good fight. I shall not see another like it."

He tried to lift one arm, and Khlit saw that his hand was mangled, and heard men whisper behind his back that the ribs of Abdul Dost were broken about his heart and that he would be a cripple henceforth. Khlit barely heard.

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He let the hilt of his broken sword fall to the earth, and took the other hand of his friend in his for a moment.

"Leave us," he said harshly to the onlookers.

He sat down by Abdul Dost, his dust-stained, weary face alight with gratitude and relief. Abdul Dost would live.

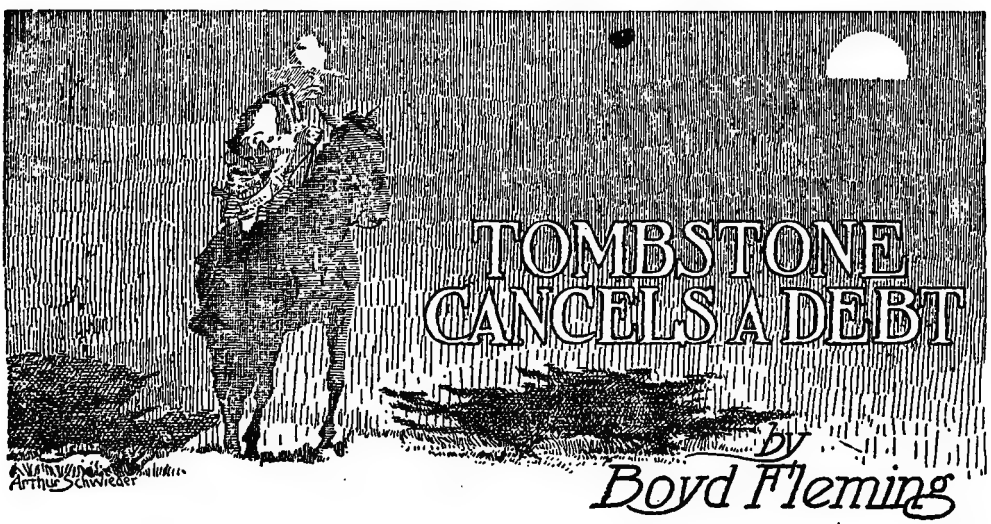
In the silence came the faint mutter of prayer from the bearded lips of Muhammad Asad—"*Allah akbar—Allah il allah*"—and presently the blind man turned his face toward Khlit.

"O Kha Khan," he whispered, "you have saved my people. How may we do you fitting honor?"

He reached out a questioning hand, but the boy at his side spoke softly, saying that Khlit was asleep.

ON THE morrow, as swiftly as it came, the remnant of the Horde drifted away to the northern passes before snow should close the way. And because of the speed of their departure many tales arose in the Afghan land and the hill country—tales of spirits that had fought in Badakshan. To these stories Muhammad Asad, who became *kwajah* of the Afghans and leader of his people, made reply—

"Not by spirits, nor by the strength of warriors, was the Mogul defeated—but by the fellowship of two men."



TOMBSTONE sat on the little porch of his ranch-house and scowled across the floor of the valley toward the distant mountains. The mountains marked the boundary of his kingdom; were the only fences that shut it in. The tiny specks moving across the valley were his riders keeping a guarding eye on his hundreds of steers. Ten years before Tombstone had ridden into the valley with a lame horse and one pack-mule. Now it was his.

Most men would have looked upon this with pride but the eyes of the huge, grim-faced man on the porch held no such light as they swept the scene before him. His gaze was impersonal, detached and brooding. It was this lack of interest, this stern matter-of-factness, that had won for him the name of "Tombstone" among his cowboys. All his orders were given through "Slim" his foreman. Each night Slim reported at the little ranch-house where, except for a Chinese cook, Tombstone lived alone. Among his cowboys Tombstone was known only as a gruff, silent man who always wore a scowl, although they all admitted that he always returned their greeting when they did meet and had often proved himself a fair-play man.

On this evening the scowl on Tombstone's face seemed more tense than usual. His eyes turned often toward the lower end of the valley where a trail led through a pass in the mountains. At last he was rewarded by the sight of a little cloud of dust, golden in the slanting rays of the sun, floating upward. Leaning back, he gave a grunt of satisfaction. Slim was returning from his mission to Blue Rock. Lighting his pipe, Tombstone placed his booted feet on the worn railing of the porch. In spite of the clearness of the dust-cloud he knew it would be a long time before the rider reached the ranch.

The short twilight had faded to velvet darkness when the soft thud of hoofs caused him to

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remove his feet from their resting-place and let the front legs of his chair sink to their place upon the floor.

"That you, Slim?" he asked quickly as the sound of hoofs came to a pause near the end of the porch.

"Right," said a low voice from the darkness and the next instant the tall form of the foreman sank upon the top step of the porch and commenced to roll a cigaret.

"Well, what did you learn?" grunted Tombstone when the cigaret was lit and a cloud of smoke surrounded the other's head.

"I slid into Blue Rock 'bout sundown night 'fore last," answered Slim. "The story reached you straight. The owner of Long Tom Mine is there; been there 'bout a week and as far as I could find out will be there 'bout three or four days more. I left there 'fore chuck this mornin'."

For some time Tombstone sat in thought and then abruptly gave a call. In answer Wing Wong's yellow face popped from a window.

"Wong, go saddle Nightmare and throw some grub together," he said gruffly.

When the Chinaman had gone he reached inside his vest and drew forth a long envelope which he handed to Slim.

"Slim," he said, "you've been the only real friend I've made in twelve years. I've got to go to Blue Rock and collect a bill from the owner of Long Tom—it has been due for years. If I shouldn't happen to come back in two weeks you are the owner of everything here. Those papers will make your claim all clear and square. Don't lose them."

Slim looked up quickly and for the first time noticed the gun sagging at Tombstone's hip. His eyes narrowed slightly.

"You ain't needin' a little backin' in case of a crowd or anything, are you?" he asked softly. "I ain't had any real excitement since Ferris an' his bunch got run out of the hills."

"Not this time, Slim," replied the other. "This is a little private game between the owner of Long Tom and me. I've been a-waitin' twelve years for him to come into my country. Them twelve years has been the longest years of my life. He'll pay for them now—every one!"

"Ain't you knowed where to find him all this time?" asked Slim in surprize.

"Well, you see I couldn't exactly face him without he come to the mountains. I wouldn't have stood a fair show."

Slim looked at him rather puzzled and the big man, seeing the look, sank to a seat beside him.

"Slim, I reckon as how I might as well show you the cards and then you will not be taking in any wrong stories in case I shouldn't happen to come back," he said. "You see this Tom Higgens—that's him as owns the Long Tom—him an me was once in love with the same girl. That was twelve years ago, back in Flat Top when she was booming. I was third owner in a worthless mine known as Satan's Dump. This Higgens was the express-agent at Flat Top."

HE PAUSED long enough to light his pipe. Slim said nothing.

"Mildred always seemed to lean my way more than Tom's," Tombstone continued. "I was pretty reckless in them days and drank a heap more than I should, but I was a good spender and Tom was kinder tight as a usual thing. Well, I just about had everything cinched as far as Mildred went when a story went rolling 'round the camp that I was a squaw-man and had a squaw back in Montana.

"The girl turned cold right away sudden, although I don't think she ever took any stock in the story. It took me about ten hours to trace the story back to Higgens and go after him. He was on duty in his shanty at the time—it was late at night and I'd been drinking quite a lot that night. I rode over to his shanty and had it out with him, with my two hands. I left him layin' on the floor in a heap and rode out to Satan's Dump and crawled into my bunk."

Once more he paused and for a moment his eyes glared into the night as if seeking an enemy.

"Crawling into my bunk was what saved my hide," he went on after a time. "They never thought of looking for me there. My two partners showed up about daylight and I got the news. Tom Higgens, after I left, made tracks for the Bean Pot Saloon, his face streaming blood and his clothes all tore. He said as how some one had grabbed him from behind when he was reading; said he put up a fight but was laid out with a gun-butt. When he come to himself the strong-box was unlocked and eight thousand in gold missing. He said he didn't get a good look at the man, but that didn't do me much good when, as he knew, every one knew I'd started to his place about half an hour before."

"You sure ain't goin' to say you up an' run!" gasped Slim as the other paused again.

"My head was too darn thick with booze to think straight," confessed Tombstone with a sigh. "I seen my mistake after I run, but it was too late then so I had to keep on going. My turn is going to come now!"

"What you aimin"to do?" asked Slim. "Suppose he refuses to draw—that breed usually does—what then? You can't shoot him down like you would a snake—not in Blue Rock!"

A grim smile crossed the face of Tombstone and his eyes took on a cold glint.

"Mildred is his wife now," he said slowly, "and I'll bet my saddle she ain't had a happy day since she married him. She always was a delicate, shrinking kind; all heart. I can guess

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the life he has shown her. Once let him be sure of her and he'd be meaner than a boil. I am going to make him tell her the truth and let her choose between us. If he can't see it that way we'll fight it out! These twelve years have been hell for me and he will have to pay for them. If he can't do the square thing by me and the girl I'll leave her a widow!"

"Suppose he sees you first and whispers to the sheriff. He hangs out in Blue Rock most of the time," said Slim. "You got to remember that you're still wanted for that eight thousand clean-up!"

"I was in Flat Top three years ago," said the other calmly. "Had a nice little talk with Anderson who was sheriff when I worked the Satan's Dump. He didn't know me from a chink laundry. Higgens won't know me until I lay down my hand and when I do that it'll be too late to tell any one in this world except the girl he cheated into marrying him. After that he ain't going to be anxious to talk much!"

At that moment Wing Wong came up to the porch leading a big black horse.

"Glub in saddle bag—all same long time gone," he squeaked as he handed Tombstone the bridle.

Without a word the big man swung into the saddle and held out a hand to Slim.

"So-long, Slim," he said sharply. "If I ain't back in two weeks you are the boss. Don't lose them papers!"

"If you ain't back in two weeks I'm going gunnin'!" shot back Slim. "If you play a winnin' hand make him give you that eight thousand; you earned it!"

His only answer was a snort from Nightmare and the rapid throb of heavy hoofs.

SEVEN miles down the valley Tombstone passed the camp-fire of three of his riders. As he crossed the circle of light one of the men recognized him and waved his hat in greeting. Tombstone lifted his hand slowly in the indifferent manner his men had learned to expect and rode on in silence.

"Now ain't that sweet!" exclaimed the bronzed young man who had waved, spitting a stream of tobacco juice toward the fire. "It sure would break the darn ol' pickle-faced cuss right into two separate chunks if he'd ever give a real, honest-to-goodness hello!"

"He got a grouch at some time an' it growed in on him," offered one of the others.

"It'll poison him if he don't git it pulled pretty soon," grunted the other, an old man with white hair.

Tombstone pushed the big black horse all that night and daybreak found him within a mile of Blue Rock. He did not enter the town that day. He turned off into a little cañon where he found water and feed for his horse and waited for evening. He was playing safe and wanted the cover of darkness as well as a fresh horse before going any farther.

He rode up to the single hotel that Blue Rock boasted shortly after dark that night. Tying his horse within the dense shadow of a nearby shed he pulled his hat low upon his forehead and entered the little office. A man in shirt sleeves glanced up lazily from behind a soiled newspaper.

"Is Mr. Higgens stopping here?" Tombstone asked slowly.

The man in shirt sleeves pointed with his thumb toward a hallway at the rear.

"Last door on the right," he drawled with a yawn.

Tombstone walked down the dim hallway and paused at the last door on the right, from beneath which shone a streak of light. After listening for an instant he lifted his hand and rapped sharply.

"Come in!" cried a rather shrill voice.

He shoved open the door and stepped within. The room contained two men, one of them a little bald-headed man who seemed all glasses, the other a large, roughly dressed man who was seated upon the edge of the table behind which the little man was seated. A lamp upon the table shone upon a number of papers and samples of ore.

"I'm looking for Mr. Higgens—Tom Higgens," said Tombstone, gazing sharply at the large man.

"I am Mr. Higgens," said the little, bald-headed man in the same shrill voice that had bade him enter.

Tombstone restrained a gasp and stared at him.

The eyes of the little man swept over him, noting the high-heeled boots and dust-covered clothing. A sudden smile crossed his face.

"You were sent here by my friend Ralph Hodge?" he asked quickly.

Tombstone, not knowing the name and too surprized for speech, nodded.

"Please take a seat for a moment," the little man said with a wave of his hand. "I am going over some reports with Mr. Clare, my superintendent; it will take but a minute."

Silently Tombstone sank into a chair. Could this little man with the bald head and nervous fingers be the Tom Higgens of Flat Top, the express-agent who had been noted for his quick draw and cool nerve? He passed a gnarled hand over his bewildered head and automatically produced his black brier pipe and lit it.

As the superintendent departed Higgens turned with a smile.

"Ralph said he would send a man that knew the mountains. Are you the man?" he asked.

Once more Tombstone nodded silently. His mind had been made blank by his surprize. He puffed savagely at his pipe in the attempt to collect his wits. Higgens looked at the cloud of

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smoke and his eyes shifted uneasily toward an adjoining room, the door of which stood slightly open.

"You are familiar with the Green Basin country, Mr. er—Mr.——"

"Wiggens," supplied Tombstone, blowing a huge cloud of smoke. "Yes, I know every foot of the Green Basin."

"Er—yes, quite so. Quite so!" said the little man, his eyes shifting once more toward the adjoining room. "It is rather—er—warm in here. Perhaps we had better step outside to talk over this matter."

As he said this he rose quickly to his feet. As he did so a sharp, feminine voice came from the other room. At the sound of the voice Tombstone gave a violent start.

"Tom," the voice snapped, "if you must smoke that filthy pipe please go outside to do it!"

"Yes, my dear, we are going this very minute," said the little man quickly.

Tombstone hastily dropped the hot pipe into his pocket and stared toward the door. That voice had a familiar ring; after twelve years he could still thrill to it.

"My wife is in rather delicate health," said the little man softly. "Come, we will go outside."

IN A daze the big man followed the little man through the hotel office and out into the cool mountain air.

"Mr. Wiggens, it is a very peculiar thing I am about to ask of you," said Higgens as they seated themselves on a worn bench that ran along one side of the ramshackle hotel. "I am anxious to have a week or so of trout fishing and perhaps a little good shooting, but as I am unfamiliar with this country I must have a reliable guide. To tell the truth it has been years since I've done that sort of thing. You see Mrs. Higgens cares—er—very little for anything of that kind. She is—er—very interested in social matters and considers time spent away from the—the social centers as wasted. She would have very little sympathy with my plans."

The little man paused and glanced nervously about him as if fearful of being overheard, and then hastened on:

"I, myself, was always fond of the outdoors, although business responsibilities have prevented me from following my inclinations in that respect. This will be my last chance in a long time I fear, as we plan on moving to New York before long. If you can manage this as I desire I'll make it well worth your time."

Tombstone stared straight before him into the night and sought to find some way of getting at the matter that brought him to Blue Rock. He had expected to find an arrogant man of wealth. This timid little man with the big glasses and nervous voice left his mind in a whirl.

"You don't need to worry but what the fishing will be good," he managed to say in a choked voice. "It is—is all good game country."

"I have no doubt of it! No doubt of it!" cried the other eagerly. "There is another difficulty that must be overcome however. You see we—er—that is my wife, is very anxious to be in Denver the last of this week. She would feel very badly to have her plans broken at this time, and as I do not wish to—er—you see her health is rather delicate, and I can't very well—er—press my request without making her nervous."

"Then you wish to put off this trip until another time?" suggested Tombstone with a breath of relief.

"Well, no," said the little man. "You see if it were a matter of, well, of business, she could find no objection. I thought that if you could get all the outfit we will need and wait for me at the mouth of Hassel's Cañon, I could meet you there tomorrow afternoon. My wife and I leave on the morning stage but I'll have my superintendent overtake the stage about five miles out with news that will make it impossible for me to go on. I will have my wife continue the journey with the understanding that I follow as soon as possible."

The little man paused and striking a match glanced at his watch, after which he leaped quickly to his feet.

"We leave at daybreak," he said. "I must help Mildred pack. You will be at Hassel's Cañon?"

"Why, yes," said Tombstone slowly.

Without another word the little man turned and hastened toward the entrance to the hotel.

For a long time Tombstone stared after him and then rose slowly to his feet and moved toward the shed where he had left his horse. Half-way there he suddenly remembered the voice that had caused him to drop his hot pipe into his pocket.

"It was her voice," he muttered softly. "I'm going to be just fool enough to try and get a look at her!"

He had little difficulty in locating the windows he sought; not only were they the only ones showing a light, but also a rather loud feminine voice floated out into the night. He recognized the voice and drew softly to a position from which he could see the speaker.

As his eyes fell upon the owner of the voice he gave a gasp of amazement. He saw a large, heavy-faced woman whose billowing curves seemed trying to burst the shimmering silk gown that covered them. Her face was very red. Before her, his thin figure seeming to grow smaller every minute, stood Higgens.

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"I heard every word you said to that worthless mountain loafer, Tom Higgens!" she stormed. "It was a very nice little plan but it don't work this time. You are going with me to Denver! If you think for a moment that I am going to throw aside the opportunity of meeting the Carltons, just to let you make a fool out of yourself over some silly little fish, you're greatly mistaken!"

"But, my dear!" gasped the little man. "You see——"

"I see that you are not to be trusted!" she broke in. "You knew I was planning on using your influence with the Blantons to bring about an introduction with some worth-while people!"

"But I can't ask Blanton to——"

"You will ask Blanton just what I tell you to!"

"But, my dear, I only——"

"Don't 'my dear' me!" she cried sharply. "You are going to Denver on the morning stage and that is the end of the matter."

Tombstone did not wait to hear any more. Softly he stole away and hurried to the shed where he had left his horse.

"And he said she was in delicate health!" he gasped in a voice of awe.

A moment later Nightmare's big hoofs were thundering toward home.

"RED" REGAN sat on the top rail of the corral watching one of his fellow-riders saddle a half-broken mustang when his eyes detected a cloud of dust down the valley. As the cloud grew closer he gave a grunt.

"Here comes old Tombstone," he observed to the man in the corral. "He didn't make a very long stay. He passed Pop Kent an' us night 'fore last, goin' —— bent for the lower pass."

The man in the corral wiped the sweat from his eyes and squinted through the fence.

"He sure has been pushing Nightmare, by the looks o' his hide," he said.

As Tombstone drew closer the man on top of the fence waved his hand. Tombstone saw and snatching his dust-laden hat waved it above his head, shouting a loud "Good mornin', boys."

The man on the fence stared after him with open mouth and then fell on his back inside the corral.

"Drunk!" he gasped as he clambered to his feet. "Old Tombstone is drunk sure as ——"

"I reckon Higgens gets the flowers, eh?" drawled Slim as he rode out and met his friend.

Tombstone's face turned slightly darker beneath his tan.

"Why, you see, him and I talked it over a bit and decided to call all old deals off. You see twelve years is a darn long time. Heaps of things can happen in twelve years!"

Slim stared at him for a full minute and then cried—

"You—you ain't sayin' you let him keep that eight thousand!"

"Well," said Tombstone slowly, "I kinder figured after seein' just how he stood, that he had earned that much!"

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EL CAPITAN ARRRNIE

by Chester L. Saxby

A WHISTLING wind; every sail set and snoring; whipping stays piping lustily the mad sweet song of the sea! An edge of slanting sunlight just touching a long line of spume in the distance where rested something more than clouds.

Arnie Sondheim, mast-hand on the brig, *Snowbird*, stood in the bow and peered from out shaded eyes at the hazy something gathering form. A weather-roughed hat sat upon the back of his head. A great breath lifted his muscular shoulders.

To him came Captain Miant, a master of the better sort and as good a sailor as trod decks, a man of steady temper and fairness as well. His shrewd countenance told his success in these seas; a rare judge of men was Cap'n Miant.

"What are we making, Arnie?" spoke the captain.

Arnie Sondheim turned and showed a pair of mild blue eyes set in a face of unscarred bronze, a face neither young nor old for all the eager expectation, for all the thinness in the cheeks, the odd twist of the mouth bespeaking a knowledge of the world and its ways. On the ship's books he was set down at thirty-five; he might have been older or younger; no man knew beside himself—and he knew to a day, to an hour.

Nothing that he had ever been told did he forget; facts lodged with him for easy use. Uneducated except in the rude school of the forecastle, he nevertheless possessed one of those natural minds that take deep impressions and keep them. His mates, having long since given up the effort to understand his rare gift, were content to wag their heads. His captain utilized the man's amazing powers frequently.

The skipper stood waiting while Arnie raised his eyes aloft to the foretop-gallant, dropped them and looked over the side; seemed to listen a moment.

"Thirteen and a half knots, sir," he reported, snapping it out.

"Good! And we'll make port——"

"In forty-eight minutes, sir."

The captain nodded as if this were the veriest commonplace, as indeed it was. He swung about and bawled an order to the mate, who scurried to raise the port watch, then steadfastly scanned the murky horizon gradually lifting in gray and green.

"San Carlos," drifted abstractedly from Arnie's lips.

"Eh!—You know it! I was trying to recall; three or four years ago——"

"Aye, sir; 1909 that was, sir; third day of October, a day like this."

"Mm! Then you can tell me. We're taking on a full cargo of wine again, the only stuff the place is good for. How many barrels did we get aboard before?"

Arnie plucked his thoughts out of that far mist to answer—

"Thirty-three hundred and fifty-nine barrels we stowed aboard her; fourteen hundred and eleven for'd, seventeen hundred and twenty-two aft, the other two hundred and twenty-six——"

"It seemed to me," the captain mused; "it seemed to me—but I expect I'm wrong." He made to heel about, stopped and scrutinized Arnie narrowly.

"There'll be no touching the wine, lad. While you're aboard my brig, I'll not have that!"

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At that Arnie smiled and "Aye, aye, sir," with a shrug of his shoulders.

Captain Miant regarded him from under a knuckled forehead, sized him up and sized him down, all the fine build of him from bunching yellow hair and daring, zealous, hard-lined face to the seaman's hands of him and the swelling muscle and the rude, careless grace.

"A good mate lost," he muttered to himself; "a mate thrown away." But he said nothing aloud; there was but one thing to say or so he thought; and in any event it made no difference. When a man's a slave to liquor——

That was what he thought; that was what they all thought, all but Arnie himself—and he knew. If it had mattered more to him, what they thought he might have showed them; but it did not. They shook their heads over him; he paid not the slightest attention, or if he did it was to pity them—not only the crew but the ship's officers—for the stupidity of their existence. And any who did drink—for them it meant not the same at all; they merely warmed their bellies and strutted about talking big. With him the whisky taste was the least thing; he rather disliked it.

Arnie had another reason for drinking. It constituted his one means of rising out of the ugly reality of his surroundings, out of the abject lonesomeness of existence. Sitting in Jake's place in San Francisco with a bottle before him, he closed his eyes and was enfolded in a sublime exaltation that eased his hunger, which he never could analyze; reduced his thirst, which he never could quite stem.

Music, grand, ethereal, stole round him, rising and swelling and swirling him to vast peaks whence life grew vaguely eloquent. The cheap music-box did it—the music-box and the whisky. In those moments the seventeen years of dull sea-living were shuffled off; he knew why he had been born; he heard questions answered.

The sea had somehow fooled him. He hated it, if it was his father and mother—a brutal, hoarse-voiced father shaming his inheritance; a mother with too many children to care much about one child. Never any favors from it; never a big purpose; never an explanation; never the touch of companionship.

The sea is a tremendous thing, a world of its own with feelings of its own—strange feelings, exotic emotions. Quaint, stolid, childishly sensitive, are its spawn. To be of it one must ask nothing, mold himself to easy satisfactions, be molded without volition. And this Arnie would not do, or would not stand without the one great hour of transmutation which now and again the whisky brought. He suffered the rest for this.

He hated the sea and yet he loved it. He loved it when it was big, with a supernatural bigness, one vast convulsion of movement. It was thus that he had pictured it; it was thus it had lured him as a boy. He had turned to it because it offered what he craved: sublimity, grandeur, might; unreservedly he gave himself to it. He found in it sodden, dismal, illimitable drabness in its common mood. Why it had no better thing than this for him, is that he hungered so hard, thirsted so deep. He yearned and had no idea what he yearned for. Ambition might have made a different man of him, but ambition is selfish, and Arnie knew no selfishness. He joyed in service; he was always serving. But service was no more than temporary, service to his shipmates, service to the brig's officers, service to all and sundry.

Peering over the high-running sea at the land swimming up to meet the eyes, a mad song stirred within him, not at all the same as that which twanged the taut stays and *zz-zoo-oomed* in the rounded canvas. It was exaltation without the whisky; it was Lelona. Within the Chilean port of San Carlos he would find her, at the hotel built into the hillside. In Jake's place in San Francisco there were women—plenty of them. With the help of the whisky they were wonderful creatures, but one needed the whisky. He knew that when he saw Lelona again after almost four years he would not need the whisky. He thought her real, this slender bud of a girl; she dazzled him; she was glamour; she was inspiration. And so he laughed to himself as Captain Miant strode off aft. Drink! Why should he want drink when Lelona was in San Carlos? Lelona was drink—food and drink. Swilling grog—that was for San Francisco.

He fairly sprang into the rigging when the mate's voice blew to him the happy call:

"Hands ahoy to take in sail! First on the yard-arm; gaskets loosed!"

Ah, what a sight from the mast-head! The town standing out in red and green and white; the great, shambling hotel! Eyes within it—such eyes! He thought heaven waited there—or hell. Perhaps she would tell him. By now she would have a mind to say.

UNDER easy canvas they slid into the harbor, came up to windward of a buoy, clewed up the light sails, backed the main topsail and lowered a boat.

"Two new churches," Arnie murmured when he stood astride the beach. "And where's the use in 'em?" His quick, investigating glance traveled to right and left. "One—two—three—four new houses—the wharf eighteen feet longer—brown blinds in the hotel instead of— Ahoy, José! How the kid's grown! Remember the tobac I gave you when you told the little girl I was here?"

The spindle-legged Chilean youth, rolling his eyes about in a coffee-brown face, stared suspiciously at Arnie. Arnie laughed exultantly,

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glad of the feel of the solid earth underfoot, beginning to live.

"Just like the cap'n, José—no memory; none of 'em any memory!"

Then the captain was closeted with the shipping agent, and he was off up the sleepy, filthy street. A true course he laid to the hotel in full knowledge that a half-hour intervened with providential favor. Just time to thrust in his head at the kitchen door where Lelona with the black coils of hair and the rounded arms rattled the dishes and made sparks in her eyes. She had been a child—well, she would be a woman; and that was good. The seventeen years faded to nothingness.

Two of them—both dark-eyed. One of them shrieked; the other swept him her smile and came forward, carrying herself in that flowing Spanish style. It was Lelona—the woman. She welcomed him although she did not know him, for was he not a sailor, big and handsome and with money in his pocket? He chuckled at her forgetting. She would know him when he kissed her; she would remember then.

But he did not kiss her there—no; the kitchen reeked of grease and onions with which the two had nothing to do. Behind, on the slope of the hill bloomed the passionate purple bougainvillea, and over the gnarled tree-trunks lifted the love-vine drawing its sustenance from the air. This was romance such as Arnie understood, albeit he could not have told how; it came out of a dim past, this knowledge; out of past ages of North-country gypsy life; out of the experience of his ancestors. He minded little the rapacious red ants and the chigoes that burrow deep into skin so that one itches horribly for days and nights. A few intoxicating minutes with Lelona—ah, how these Spanish women grew—not up—no, no!

Lelona remembered; by the warmth of her kiss he knew it. The whisky at Jake's place became a foolish memory of no possible consequence; he had the music of the spheres in Lelona's voice.

"Ah, you *Merrricano!*" she trilled. "'Ver' bad *hombre! Sil* Kees me more—more!"

Into his arms she drooped. The tender gloom of the dark shaddock bent above them, all its white blossoms dripping the scent of the tropics.

The mate's bellow in the lifeless street below roused him. He laughed in a sudden harshness of thought; a dream it was; he must leave her. All in a clamorous burst rude and startling, he told her how lonesome he was. Bravely he argued; lightly she covered his brash words with laughter.

"When you come again, *meo* Arrrnie" she purred. "I wait. You be *capitan* I wait to see. *El capitan* Arrrnie! I look fair you' sheep. Maybe nex' tam——"

"Me captain? Sure—sure! You like me to be captain, Lelona?"

"Like! No, no; but I love! I geev myself thees *capitan*, oh, *si, sil*"

"I don't know as I do see," he grumbled. "But if that's the tune, Lelona, I'll have to dance to it. They're calling! Quick! Show me how to kiss!"

She showed him, and all the restlessness fell away. Because the lesson was long, still kissing he carried her down the hill. Then at a huge rolling gait he made for the beach and the irate captain sweltering in the sun. He heard the captain growl to the mate:

"The fool! He's been for whisky!"

He grinned to himself then. Not a word did he answer that scathing tongue. From the main chains he jumped for the winch, from the winch into the hold. He sang at the unloading, and at the sweating job of stowing aboard the wine casks. The crew wagged their heads at the unnatural sound. From the taffrail Captain Miant watched him, unable to comprehend.

Four days of back-breaking labor; then ashore for the checking and rechecking. Beside the gig he lounged, knowing the hotel was too far away; that in another minute the big, square-headed mate would approach with a request—ah, there he came issuing from the warehouse, the lists in his hand—all the itemized cargo and the stores. Into Arnie's palm he thrust them with the usual comment:

"Add 'em up. See if they're right. Eye-weakness gives me headache——"

At these times a keen pleasure stole over Arnie; not the pleasure he had felt on the hillside with Lelona beside him, a feeling not of peace but of triumph. He was master of this game; he knew more than the mate; it was a little joke over which he chuckled each time. Later the mate would ask him on the sly what he wished for the bit of work in which he reveled; and he would reply, his voice jumping—

"The cap'n's book on navigation with the charts in it."

And the mate would grunt and stare and call him crazy and go fetch the venomously dry tome and guttural something about liking the way the story came out in the last chapter. Arnie would pore over the technical exposition during his brief watches below and return it completely devoured and at his finger-tips forever after. But he cared not for that; he did not read to learn; only to be exercising his mind.

Now squatted beside the gig, he began the luscious checking of those fine figures, making a lightning multiplication of fractions and carrying them all out in his head. The stub of a pencil he haled out of his breeches and set down two changes. Then, stowing away the precious length of graphite, he figured the percentages, the primage, humming under his breath, lost to the world, chuckling now and again at bits of error—"Menelo's little jokes."

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For a proper enjoyment of the two pages of fat column extensions, he eased back until his head rested against the boat. This was poetry; this was a mental feast all too soon over. And Barse, blear-eyed Bose Barse, staring hauntedly over his shoulder, Barse who had two kids in San Francisco and forever talked about them, Barse could not appreciate his satisfaction.

Arnie sighed and rose, saw the mate's coat tails disappearing into the shed, strolled to the door and fell to humming a chantey, whereat the mate pricked up his ears and with artful carelessness wandered near. The lists changed hands beneath the mate's coat, and the mate, hastily perusing them, advanced upon Menelo scowling.

"See what I've caught you at, —— it!" he bawled, while Arnie grinned in the doorway at the hoax. "Won't do! We'll be having to keep your books next."

Then into the hissing surf with the gig, and the oars flashing as they bit deep, and a vagrant taste of the old hunger as they made out to the brig. An order bawled from the waist, sail loosed, the windlass manned, the slip-ropes and gear cast off, yards braced aback. Slowly the *Snowbird* responded, got under weigh.

San Francisco now—a tedious pull up the warm coast. In the still evenings when the wind hardly stirred the big canvas and the sheets forgot to *clack*, Arnie lay in his bunk absorbing every word of Huntley's "Science of Navigation." Not until he had finished the last page did he grow restless, unhappy—wondering—wondering.

"I wait. You be *capitan* nex' tam'—*el capitan* Arrrnie! Maybe." Lelona's voice holding him off, punishing him. "*Meo* Arrrnie——"

By degrees the repetition of what she had said struck him oddly, regaled him. Seated on the main top-gallant yard-arm, the full purport of her demand reached his inner consciousness. He, Arnie Sondheim, a captain! At the bare idea he began to laugh so that he almost slid to destruction. Again and again the absurdity took him full force. He wormed into the galley and told the cook the grim joke; Arnie could always manage a hearty laugh, no matter if the joke was on him. He waited for the chocolate-colored worthy to sound his rare enjoyment of the picture in true Alabaman chortling. The honest black face, however, remained solemn.

"Das right, chile! Ain' yo-all puffec'ly knowledged ob dis ship? Wahn't I a-heahing da cap'n askin' yo-all how'm da big ol' mains'l maisuhed crossways?"

Arnie looked in disgust at the blinking faded eyes and ended the talk.

He spoke to Bose Barse about the matter; and to his further bewilderment Barse nodded his shaggy head and said he'd as leave take orders from anyw'ars.

Wherefore Arnie gave them all up. But the honeyed words of Lelona, still fresh and redolent of yellow jasmine that garbed the hills of San Carlos, came again and again, bothered him, gave him strange distress.

He stood his trick at the wheel in the full equatorial night wherein all the stars of the universe clustered like millions of chip diamonds high over the mast, and the peace of eternal death stole upward from the fathoms-deep opalescence. Mystery whispering to mystery, jemmed blackness to silver pallor. Quieted by these things so that he laughed not at all, Arnie leaned upon the spokes and reflected:

"Ay, and why not? *Capitan* Arrrnie . . . Captain Sondheim!"

The foolish playfulness of a Chilean maid who knew nothing of the sea and its ways, its hard ways, but in the magic stillness so much less foolish! A puff in the light breeze brought the smell of the wine back to him; half-aware of the heavy, insidious odor, he gave it but a fragment of thought; it recalled him to reality, nothing more. Before the odor had blown away his mind wrestled again with the mystery of womankind.

"*El capitan* Arrrnie . . . nex' tam' . . . maybe."

IN SEVENTEEN years of following the seas the idea of bunking aft had bothered him never. He saw no added joy in it; before the mast or on the taffrail life must have the same look; one had but the one picture to see. Now a something was touched in him. Lelona desired him to be a captain, as much as told him that then, maybe—well, why not? After all, had she not the right to expect . . .

Seventeen years slopping about in a wet forecastle, making sail, reefing, furling, clewing down and clewing up, slushing, tarring, heaving on the windlass, sweating in the tropics, freezing at the Horn; seventeen years of doing the bidding of those no better than he; and she asked him what he was, what those seventeen years had brought him, had made him. He knew what they had brought him: bully bill and stale bread and harsh, spewing language; twenty dollars a month and a battered sea-chest containing some odds and ends of trinkets, things of no value, thin locks of hair he once would have blushed over, but no more; some dirty clothes, a rusty knife a Kanaka had flung at him, grazing his scalp. He could do no worse than that.

In the dim, smudged past his forefathers had been vikings ruling many lands, living like Roman emperors. On a desolate beach in Chile a captain gave him a tongue-lashing, thought him a slave to the taste of rum with a will as weak as rain water.

The light from the binnacle, reflected upward, reached his face as he humped over the

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wheel. It drew into relief the telltale marks of his living, the living that was but a wearisome quest of the unattainable—companionship. One corner of his mouth wrinkled up as he stared at the needle. Involuntarily he emitted a metallic laugh; whereupon close beside the wheel-house a shadow rose.

"W'at's it about, matey? Dreamin'?" came Barse's hoarse voice.

"——, Bose! Just wondering what they're doing at Jake's." Arnie cast about for an explanation. How would Barse understand? "That all right, Bose?"

"Nary a bit of it, matey. That there's a shame tuh my view of ut. D'yuh mind, I cut the bottle cold? An' w'atta yuh think: there'll be a mite of a woman off the dock w'en we warps in; an' tykes—there's two, matey; one as kin on'y squeek——"

"Stow it, Bose! You told me all that before," mouthed Arnie. Somehow the idea of the mite of a woman and the tykes had an edge to it. The flying jib clapped once; the wheel spun three spokes. The compass needle vibrated; the flying jib clapped again. Frowning foolishly, Arnie steered on into the dark—on and on—into the dark.

Thereafter, times not a few, the rude dreamless mate who did his work well and knew not why or how he did it, was put to some difficulty by sundry questions Arnie respectfully asked him; nice questions of ship handling. Indeed, they were not ordinary questions. The mate, having reason to respect Arnie's knowledge of a number of things, hesitated, squeezed up the corners of his big, pacific eyes, removed the pipe from his broad, loose-lipped mouth, cleared his throat, spat several times and made much ado over his answers, which he considered quite good.

But Arnie, ridden by a novel wonder, urged on by a Chilean maid's shrewd tongue, was never satisfied, for he could not adjust the mate's explanation with what he had learned in his Huntley. When the opportunity offered, he repeated his questions to the captain, knowing himself foolish in thinking these thoughts, reading in the captain's enigmatic face the vanity of all this. And the captain, scanning him intently, treated his inquiries with a gruff, curt generosity, a sort of magnanimous disdain when he answered—which he always did.

Arnie recognized well the tone, the look; he felt certain that he knew Cap'n Miant by now, just as the captain was satisfied that he knew Arnie, knew him and knew how far to go with him. Perhaps that was why they got on so well and why Arnie Sondheim, being paid off in San Francisco, signed again with the *Snowbird*. The wag of the captain's head as Arnie made forward to his station—to be sure, that was something else. But that, too, is easily comprehended.

There were after all few good mates and still fewer second officers of any worth to a ship. So the man regarded the master with a free and easy tolerance of that officer's opinion of him; and the master regarded the man—ay, with a touch of sympathy, no doubt, but no more than a touch. Both saw only the masks that the sea had molded.

And yet the days and the nights began to play havoc behind Arnie's front of indifference. The rich, tantalizing tones of Lelona's musical throat persisted; they throttled down the first instinctive laugh of self-consciousness; through hours of novel bewilderment, of inward questioning; they drove him to a new outlook, roused in him a vague discovery of the way to conquer the seventeen years of arid living.

"—*el capitan* Arrrnie—I geev myself thees *capitan*——"

The splendor of this heady music drifted and sifted through the bellying sails, wafted ethereally through the taut rigging, sounded with the ship's bell eight times in every watch. It was of the essence of mysterious enchantment which, like the genii of old, rose invisible out of the hold where the wine casks stood upon one another, gallons and gallons and gallons. Constantly the air lay saturated with the fumes of the cargo stealing out of the battened hatchways. It really made no difference what was crowded below decks. Arnie was dreaming his dream.

NEAR Santa Rosa Island off the coast of Southern California something of that dream took form. It came with a random gust of wind that caught the brig with all sails set, jerked the foretop-gallant out of the second mate's hands and spun him close to death's door. Braced and ready at that threshold, Arnie swung head down and drew the man back by a daring feat. But the man's left leg was broken with that first swift jerk. They laid him in his berth and the mate cursed roundly for an hour.

Captain Miant held his peace and ran a vexed eye over the forecastle, for he must choose a man for the place from among the crew, and this is always a hard matter. The circumstances made it doubly hard, what with the presence there of Arnie Sondheim, seventeen years on the high seas and as able a sailor as one could wish if only——

The captain followed the old practise and called the crew aft. Briskly he informed them that they might name the one he should take. He hoped they might speak for Barse, whose age commanded respect and whose increasing family ashore gave him good reason for wishing the job. Failing of that, he hoped they would follow custom of shipboard as closely as he and refuse the responsibility. Instead they rasped out:

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"I'm for Arnie Sondheim, sir! Sondheim's yer man! Arnie, I say!"

The master looked at the man and frowned. There was wine aboard and a ship's officer must be depended upon at all times. The man lifted his head, all red of face, his eyes liquid with a new-found concern, a stirring wonder, and looked at the master. Captain Miant hesitated the barest space of time, then barked:

"Well, well, lads! If that's your say, you've said it. Let's not stand gawking at each other. Plenty of work to be done. Mr. Sondheim, swing your duffle into the cabin and put the watch to bending a new forestays'l. Port watch below!"

And there in a trice it was done. *Mr.* Sondheim! A ship's officer and bunking aft! On the ground-swell the vessel dipped her bows in salutation, while the ensign, not to be outdone in that absorbing moment, stirred fitfully, and the crew cheered. Remarkable; nothing less! Perhaps the crew knew what they were about; perhaps they did not. Behind his masked eyes Captain Miant speculated and the chief mate heard, or thought he heard, a snort of disgust when the log-book snapped shut.

Arnie strode past the grinning, bobbing, prophetic cook like a man in a daze. Nevertheless he took up his tasks in the fashion of an experienced man. The enigmatic smile left his face, to be succeeded by an observant, ready earnestness. His voice rang with far-reaching clarity; yet he wasted no words, nor had he need to.

Short-handed, the starboard watch jumped to his bidding with tickled alacrity. Boyishly inspired, the heavens opening to bathe him in a new sensation, he swept into action. He did not drive; he did not coax. He took the shrouds at a run, beat the best of them onto the bunt or into the slings, cast off gaskets, sweated at the halliards, strained at sheet and windlass. In fiendish glee they of the starboard watch roared their defiance to the mate's watch struggling in the main top; down the back stays they slid until they burned their breeches through, and often their triumphant cry went up first—

"Haul out to leeward!"

Arnie walked on air. Only by thrusting down his heels hard could he make certain of meeting the deck. Who could have supposed it would be thus, that life should suddenly awaken from sheer monotony and assume color and value and strength of purpose simply by the swinging of one's duffle into the after-cabin? But so it was, and the hunger had entirely lost its edge, the thirst was strangely abated. A bigger thing than he had ever known, a golden cup brimming full, he had unexpectedly quaffed. *Mr.* Sondheim it was. Jake's place in San Francisco paled into insignificance. The bitter, burning whisky had no meaning now. Seventeen years of wondering, of dwindling faith; and suddenly out of the muck of it all, knowledge and realization.

No matter what was required, Arnie's lightning mind and astonishing ingenuity met it on the instant. His reckless leadership was never without a well-devised plan. Nothing that he had ever heard or watched escaped him; as if it were a seed waiting in the dark fertile ground, it sprang forth now, a stout shoot, and burst into flower. Once Captain Miant, watching critically from the taffrail, muttered involuntarily:

"Eh! Where did he get that? Not from me," and then, a light dawning in his mind—"Huntley's method, by the great horn spoon!" and down the companion he clumped to see if his small library had been tampered with. Another time he spoke the second mate bruskly—

"Well done, Mr. Sondheim!" whereupon the two looked steadily into each other's eyes, and Arnie laughed, a pleased, frank laugh, quite after the manner of a boy, whereas he had acted very much the old salt.

Arnie himself wondered at the change in the world, at the elixir surging in his veins. Being a rude poet, whenever he breathed the fumes of the wine through the boards, he thought to himself that he was knowing the effects of wine without the drink; he was never sober; his intoxication was absolute, not stupefying but recreating. His brain worked day and night with superlative clearness and force; on watch and off, he performed prodigies of labor.

Hours below he declined to sleep but stuck his nose into all manner of technical reading. He did it without really knowing why, for he had sufficient exercise for his mind on duty; he no longer read for the reading's sake. Why, then? Of what was this desire born? Ay, of what? Ambition; the far call of those vikings of old; the strong whisper of the age-old sea pitting its cunning and its superb power against the artifice of man; the sweet maunderings of Lelona, the simple and yet not so simple Chilean maid; none of these, perhaps, and all of them. At least, Arnie not once lost the voice of Lelona in the devil's mists and the chanting winds of God.

When the mate went ashore at San Diego to bring off some new spars in place of the cracked ones, Arnie stopped him close beside the rail. He grinned like a Billikin, his face all flaming, his eyes swimming and fighting down his ardor.

"You'll be doing me a favor," he said, and out it came: "a card put in the mail—mark it 'Lelona at the hotel, San Carlos, Chile.' You can say on it that I—that I'm well and a mate; there'll be no more needed. She'll understand; she's a good kid. It'll tickle her; women are funny. Send her my love and say—'mate.'"

"You got a fine nerve," the mate grumbled.

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"That's all?" But he sent the card. Arnie had taken the old walrus of a mate by storm, hardened as he was.

In the interim, while the brig rode at anchor, Arnie worked off his feelings by stripping to the waist and leading in the dog's business of cleaning the vessel. But it was not a dog's business now; it did not turn the stomach. His straining back glistened and burned in the hot sun; they heard him singing; perforce, they had to turn to and holystone the decks with him, hoarsely roaring out the chorus of his chantey. The captain saw it all and lost his frown, mumbled to himself.

UP ANCHOR and northing once more. Straight on toward Point Conception where the wind blows like a demon possessed. Captain Miant hauled out to give the promontory room and thought himself in rare luck and clear of danger, when down swooped a nasty gale out of the northwest. It struck the brig and made every stick in her shiver and clack and groan, every cleat and tackle block echo with the strain. Baremasted she ran for it, kicking up her heels, frightened, quaking beneath magical, translucent mountains of green water hanging over her decks.

It began in the gray light of dawn, and grayer the light grew before noon. By the first dog-watch the sea was a raging mass of monstrous commotion; the air swirled down and mingled with it. Sea and sky spun high and low. A man could not stand up under the punishment the decks received. With the blotting of the sun, the course was lost utterly. The captain figured his dead reckonings. One glance into the binnacle, and he threw them away. The crew huddled in the forecastle, vainly sought to keep dry, strained their ears for the death sound of the surf.

Arnie alone kept his spirits. Now, indeed, he walked on air, on air and water, spun into the lee scuppers by a twist of the protesting, writhing vessel. His iron clutch shaken loose from the hastily rigged life-line, a helterskelter slide for the limb-breaking capstan. He never ceased to grin, nor did he now. Fate had begun a wonderful, unreal joke off Santa Rosa Island; this was but a part of it, an integral part of that drama which Ocean commingles of extravagant sensations.

They heard him laugh above the boom of the top hamper. The mate heard him laugh and began to think him mad. The captain, ready to admit a new opinion of the man, might even then have thought him drunk but for the change in him, a change he could not explain, would not altogether believe. But it was not madness; it was triumph. Arnie, who remembered all things, had not for one minute lost his sea-bearings. He reached the wheelhouse, where two brawny puppets smashed against each other to hold the vessel's head; he shouted at them to ease her two points and they eased her, having nothing to do but obey shivering in their helpless superstition.

Gradually the storm blew itself out, just when every man aboard had settled down to a week of it. The sun burst through, and the jib was set. Slowly, surely, the brig wore about and commenced the hard fight to retrieve the course. And in this fight as in the last, Arnie led them all. He was somehow of the still raging sea as he had been of the rushing gale; he was of the temper of wild things brought under control and made to serve a purpose. Excitement, lust of action pounded in his pulse. The joy of the storm equaled that other rampant joy that leaped with the contact of Lelona's bare arm against his cheek. He no longer compared it with the hot bliss of the bottle; mysteriously life had come without the incantation of spirits.

In the falling off of the wind and the beating up of the ship, he became less strange to the others, more nearly like them. The spirit of the storm he had been; and the storm dwindled to spasmodic gusts, dropped off little by little. He began to feel the unreality of it all, a sort of anticlimax. But it was not that; simply his overtaxed body demanded rest. He had not slept for three days and three nights. He had not eaten with any regularity, had known no desire for food.

Black coffee kept him to his work, and now the effect of that poison wore off hour by hour and refused to support his weakness. The reaction set in with the tumbling below of the port watch. Out of salt-incrusted eyes he stared at the high running seas, felt his heart beat more and more slowly. His shoulders drooped as did his spirit; he batted his eyelids to keep them from closing. A wonderful drama and it was sinking to a close. He tried to hear the rich, compelling tones of Lelona's voice: "*El capitan—el capitan* Arrrnie," but he listened in vain; the air contained no music, no music of the spheres, only the harsh creaking of the cordage.

Ah, he was tired, tired! He could not think. Swaying to the savage twist of the vessel, he stood glooming at the stars. His gaze, intercepted, fell upon the mast. It appeared to bear slightly to port—when the brig at the height of its climb stood straight upon its keel; no, not straight upon its keel. He blinked and could not make out what was wrong. When for the fourth time the helmsman complained that the ship did not answer the wheel, he at length thought he understood what had happened. It gave him a nauseated feeling in his stomach to read the signs.

But it was true; the cargo had shifted in the gale. And that meant that the ship had to be

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trimmed. Just when his interest in life had begun to drop, drop. He looked about; no use; the captain was asleep in his berth. He opened his mouth to bawl the order for all hands to tumble up. Then a wave of his new superiority stopped his voice. Pride of office; it was still his. He would do this thing; the starboard watch would trim ship unaided. After all his body did not ache so much; a seaman does not give in. In this hour he commanded the deck.

Subduing his own mutiny, he called upon the men. They grumbled, and so he made his way to the main hatch and somehow dragged off the cover. When they saw this, they swallowed their protests, and fell to at the enervating labor. Down into the dark hold with a few torches spluttering ineffectually. Around them the heat of the place clawed fiercely; the fumes of the wine added to the difficulty. But the will was there, the will that had supported the new officer from the first day at Santa Rosa Island. Grunting, slipping, falling, hoarsely cursing, they rallied to Arnie's unrelenting toil.

Barse, not so spry as the younger ones, lost his footing and went down between the barrels. His suffocated hail started a hubbub in which the unfortunate man was lost. But Arnie wriggled and crawled to where he had seen Barse disappear; rending moans guided him. Caught between two casks, the terrified white face gleamed up from the abyss. Strong nerves needed now. The rocking ship wedged the casks tighter with each minute. A false move, and Barse's life would be snuffed out. Arnie bit his lip until the blood flowed, although he could not tell the blood from the sticky fluid messing him from top to toe.

First the top level of casks removed; then, because the lower ones could not be lifted, holes had to be bored in them and half the wine run out. They came up then and were hoisted on deck. Arnie shouldered the other men aside and, with his legs in a noose, spun head-first down and got Barse about the shoulders. The cable held; the two rose to their feet; long breaths were drawn.

"Lord love yuh, Arn—Mr. Sondheim!" choked Barse. "It's not me only as thanks yuh. Two bits of tykes is countin' bread an' livin', an' the woman——"

"That's all right, Bose! At it, men!" broke in Arnie. His head swam and ached. He could not be sure of the next minute. "Clean it up, mates! She's riding better already. Give her all you've got! Right to the bilge with it, Crams!"

BY SEVEN bells the worst of the matter had been attended to, and the *Snowbird* rode on an even keel. Up on to the deck staggered the starboard watch, gasping for an honest breath, peering wearily for a place to sink down. Dead men all!

Arnie dropped on to the hatch cover. He too craved sleep; but, unlike these others, he must keep his eyes open; he was a ship's officer. And yet he was lead; his eyelids were lead; all he heard was a thrumming in his ears.

A gaunt cry from the wheel-house:

"Won't I be relieved, sir? My arms——"

Arnie heard the complaint as at a great distance. He shuffled to his feet.

"Ay, Carl—ay!" he returned thickly. Fumbling, he pushed open the wheel-house door. "Forgot your trick was up, Carl; left my mind entirely."

"Not you," and Carl rubbed his wrists, one after the other, to ease the stiffness in them. "One bell left is all. Ol' Barse's trick that is—sir."

"Never mind; I'll stand the trick."

Arnie had passed Barse sprawled dog-tired on the open deck, asleep with the spray in his face. He peered into the binnacle; before his exhausted eyes the needle jumped in a way he knew could not be so. This would not do; and yet the man could not continue to steer with numb wrists.

"Wait," said Arnie; "wait; keep it till I get——"

He meant he would rouse the mate and for the good of the ship ask him to spell off—only a matter of twenty minutes before eight bells struck and the watch changed. Many a favor the mate owed him, more than he might easily pay—when one couldn't keep the needle from jumping—this weight on the eyes—*swoof* came a tremendous sea. He steadied himself and stood stock-still, pondering in his aching head. Calling the mate out of his watch was a sad lapse of ship's etiquette, he well knew. It shouted aloud a weakness in *him*. Of course, the mate would understand; but the crew would get wind of it.

Swip swip. He looked down at the thing on which his hand rested— the half-empty wine cask with its remaining contents slapping in the lurch of the brig. *Swip swip*. He thought a moment. As ship's officer he had a duty to perform. He must go through with it. Never should they say of him that he had to give up. No, he would not call the mate.

And yet, a high sea was running and there was Carl calling again. A high sea! That meant delicate work, a careful eye for the needle. *Swip swip*. He supposed it was the thing to do—whatever would clear his brain. He disliked the stuff; he recalled with a grimace how the captain had insinuated harsh things. How little the captain knew. And always it cleared his brain. Back in Jake's place in San Francisco it made him superlatively keen. The only way—the one way out. Stooping, he held his hat to the gimlet hole and tilted the cask.

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"Coming!" He flung an answer over his shoulder to Carl at the wheel.

He saw to it that he did not let too much run into the crude receptacle. Just enough to stir the blood. The need of a quarter of an hour! He put his lips to the hat-brim, made a face as the liquor struck his palate.

"Bah!"

He threw the hat away and clumped aft to the wheel.

"All right, Carl! Pass it across—there! I've got it. Go take a rest now!"

"——! That same I'll do!" sighed Carl.

The fellow swung off. Arnie sent a glance into the binnacle. The needle was steadying. More, he began to feel the pull on the rudder that told him what second to put the helm down two points—up with the shake of the vessel. The wine was doing the work and doing it rapidly. He managed now to hear the wind above the thrumming in his ears; a veering wind. He tossed back his head and stared straight up at the immense swath of canvas. It leaked a little wind; it rattled and whispered. He gaged it carefully, allowed half a point as they climbed a comber. The big sail was whispering; he caught its message:

"*Mco* Arrrnie—Le-le-le-lona." On—on—on, into the night, a few stars showing, a sibilant "Kees me—kees me——"

When he lowered his head and inspected the binnacle, the compass needle was vibrating again. Strange! Too, his hands had gone hot; he was hot all through, hot and a trifle dizzy. He thought he understood that: it was his stomach; he had not eaten. He shook himself, swore under his breath at such weakness and forced his eyes to concentrate upon that precious black point that would not remain where it had been but vibrated so fast that it blurred. What a fool thing to behave so! No sense at all! And all the time he was staring hard at it. Still it blurred. Indeed, the whole face of the compass showed dimmer. The light was failing. Perhaps a fog had risen that everything grew so hazy; and yet—in this wind . . . .

——! Who could read that jumping, smudged point? What was that? The sound came from aloft as if something had parted. The helm wrenched; he wrestled with it, fought it over, tried to sense the sag when it came in that short instant. Too far, too far! It sprang out of his hands and whirled him to his knees. Like a maniac he tore at the spinning spokes so that they bruised his arms; but he got them willy-nilly, snugged them close, crawled to his feet. In that brief interval of triumph he laughed aloud—he knew not why save that he had conquered—a bad piece of business, but no harm done. He, a ship's officer—couldn't let it happen again. Well, no fear! Time to strike the bell. He reached up a hand, and down sped a random gust. He pulled back his hand to steady the wheel. Something rose and smote him on the temple. *Boom! Crack crack! Z-zing!* The whole ship seemed to rip asunder alow and aloft and tumble about his ears. Yards snapped; cleats blew out; a terrifying burst of thunder told him the end of all things. Groping to his knees, Arnie flung forward, crouched there, waited—wondering.

Commotion on deck and doors banging. A dozen voices bawling and demanding. A hand of steel upon his shoulder——

"What's happened?" he heard himself ask. A phrase from Huntley's "Navigation" churned round and round in his head. But he found no words to express it.

Captain Miant's face ranged close to his own, the eyes cold and glittering like frost on the shrouds. The master glared at the man; the man frowned his puzzlement at the master.

"Drunk!"

He shook his head as the word reached his understanding. Of course the captain would think that. Always so ready to think that.

"Get out, you fool! You've smashed us! Might have known it! Serves me right! Goller! Siems! Take the wheel—quick! Barse—*Mr.* Barse! Call all hands to take axes and lay aloft on the main-to'-gallant. This fellow Sondheim's done us in — got hold of the wine——"

Out on deck a wave washed over the waist. In the cool clasp of it Arnie let himself be swept without effort—so cool—so cool—and sleep; what a boon!

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THE UNHOLY ONE

by Ferdinand Berthoud

THE front door had closed according to law, and that was all the law had asked. Inside the lights burned brightly as ever; the popping of corks and clinking of glasses went merrily on. The sole and only difference between open and closed meant using the front doors instead of the side door—the door of the hotel "bar parlor."

Bulawayo was really only just waking up, just beginning to get cheerful. Just beginning to realize the profits of the day's hard work and expense. 'Tis annoying to put in a whole day steadily drinking and not get any forra'der; and only now at closing time had the effect of the procession of liquids become in any way apparent.

Hang that dry, electric up-country African climate which lets you buy up a distillery and not get any results.

The bar parlor of the Maxim Hotel was as the bar parlors of every other hotel in town, filled with the well-to-do—everybody was well-to-do in those days—and each little knot had its own form of gambling or other frontier-life excitement.

Old Jack Moore was busily playing a line of cribbage with an English captain who had just come in from the Kalahari Desert after eighteen months' survey of the border-line between Damaraland and Bechuanaland. With the aid of a few onlookers, advisers and assistants and fixed cards, also because the captain had been away from liquor so long he'd got out of practise and was getting fuddled, Jack was doing some pretty good collecting.

The captain hadn't what might be called a very healthy, florid chance.

"One more game," said Jack. "You owe me a hundred and fifty on this game. Let's make the next one three hundred pounds or nothing and finish."

The captain screwed in his eyeglass more securely—he'd worn that eyeglass religiously all the eighteen months in the Kalahari Desert and he'd have gone shooting lions with it if need be—and looked at Jack as seriously and as dignifiedly as the container of sixty good Scotch whiskies conveniently can. He also looked somewhat hurt.

"Misser Moore," he said, "I don't think you played 'xactly fair that game. Don't say you sheated me. Took 'vantage, thass all. Jus' took 'vantage."

Jack was instantly on his feet, all righteous indignation.

"Why, captain, how can you even think such a thing much less say it?" he pleaded with a beautiful, almost whisky, tear in his voice. "Captain, you've known me the three years since the country was opened and we've played together many a time before. And you've always been satisfied."

"You've never heard any one say a word against me, have you?"

The captain wrinkled his forehead and shook a wabbly, warning finger in Jack's general direction.

"Misser Moore, I say now you sheated me. You got give me back my hunner fifty pounds."

He hiccuped and repeated—

"Hunner fifty pounds. You gotta give me back my hunner fifty."

"But I haven't got it yet," Jack explained aggrievedly.

"Nev' mind. When you get it you got to give it back," the captain went on. "Nev' let man sheat me and keep money in all my life."

Jack was really on the verge of tears, for of course he hadn't got the hundred and fifty and couldn't see it coming, and he knew that next day after once the captain had got sober it would be hopeless.

"Captain," he pleaded, "let's have a drink. We didn't have a drink during all that game and it must have taken at least fifteen or twenty minutes."

For a while nothing but a look of horror came from the captain; then he once more fixed the eyeglass and gravely shook the admonishing finger.

"Nev' drink with people who sheat me. Nev'

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associate with sheats. Very p'ticular what company I keep."

"Very particular what money you keep too," commented Jack. "Captain, I'm ordering; what's yours?"

"Goin' drink by myself. Very p'ticular who I drink with," was the only remark.

Jack got up and went to the little door between the bar and the bar parlor, ordered and drank a Scotch whisky and returned to the table where he had been playing, idly and apparently thoughtlessly rattling the hotel dice-box in his hand as he walked.

The captain's face puckered, his forehead wrinkled and for a second it looked as if the eyeglass were in danger. For an instant he seemed to be trying to puzzle something serious out, to be wrestling fiercely with his own mind.

Jack put the dice-box on the table, sat down sidewise to it, crossed his legs, lighted a cigar and said nothing.

The captain sat back in his chair, tried to control his face and stared as fixedly as he could at the dice-box. Slowly the something wrestling in his mind seemed to take shape.

"Misser Moore," he said at last, "I'm very p'ticular who I drink with. Nev' let man who sheats me buy me drink. Nev' let anybody buy me drink. But I'm willing throw you once dice-box see who buys drinks."

Jack scarcely seemed to hear, scarcely noticed him, and he repeated his suggestion. Still Jack appeared not to hear.

"Misser Moore," the captain said a third time, "I ask you as a gen'leman you going throw me see who buys drinks?"

Jack looked unconcernedly at him.

"No, sir," he said decisively. "I'm not going to throw any man for drinks who calls me a cheat."

It was the captain's turn to feel hurt. With all the dignity he could command he confided:

"Misser Moore, if I said you're sheat you're sheat. Nev' go back on my word. But I'll throw you dice for drinks and take chance you'll sheat me."

Jack was on his feet at once. He had as much chance of licking the captain as of flying, but that didn't matter.

"Now you apologize at once, captain, or there'll be trouble. You've accused me over and over again of cheating you; now apologize or prove it."

The captain was just as much abashed as an elephant when a cricket chirps at it. Waving the usual admonishing finger and fixing Jack with the eyeglass, he said gravely:

"Jus' sit down minute, Misser Moore. I'm going throw you see who pays for two drinks."

"Not on your life you're not," Jack almost shouted at him.

"Yes, you are, Misser Moore," the captain placidly went on. "Jus' sit down see who buys drinks."

"I will not. I don't want to know you."

"Yes, you will."

"I will not."

The rest of the company had just begun to notice the argument, for the men's voices had risen loud enough to drown the noise of their own particular forms of vice or gambling. But the captain stopped the row just where it had started.

"Sit down, Misser Moore," he demanded. "I'm going throw you for two drinks. If you win I'll 'pologize. But I think you're —— sheat all the same."

That was exactly what Jack wanted, and with great apparent reluctance he returned to his chair. The cheerful little bones rattled, rattled and rattled again, and, just as he had engineered it to be, Jack lost.

And the captain didn't apologize.

ONCE again the captain sat back, fixed the eyeglass which didn't need fixing and waited patiently for the whisky he had drunk to get friendly. It soon did and he began to feel more human.

A short pause and he leaned over, picked up the dice-box again, rattled it meditatively and said benignly:

"Misser Moore, nev' like leave a man without giving him revenge. Throw you who pays for two more drinks."

"All right," said Jack.

"And no 'pologies on this game either," the captain seriously explained. "I said you're sheat; you said you'd throw me see if I 'pologize; you lost; so you're —— sheat."

The line of reasoning made Jack smile and smilingly he threw the dice. As he intended they came high. The captain threw—threw away low and lost. That made it even.

Still once more the captain sat back and waited for the whisky to get friendly. It did—got quite chummy with the other one in fact—and he felt wonderfully benevolent. The wrinkles on his face smoothed out a little and the eyeglassed eye saw the world more brilliantly and pleasantly.

"Thass game and game, Misser Moore," he said presently. "Mustn't leave game even. No sense leaving off even. Le's throw once more for two drinks see who's conqueror."

"All right again," said Jack, and the merry little bones rolled and rolled, and for the second time, just as Jack had manipulated, Jack lost.

That meant a third whisky, and the third whisky was also a conqueror. It got so chummy with the other two that the three together felt like setting out and doing things. Which they did.

Five minutes more and the wrinkles on the captain's forehead had left and gone to his chin

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and cheeks. He was smiling broadly. Several time he fixed the eyeglass as if to get a cast-iron grip; several times he handled the dice-box lovingly and thoughtfully, then finally put it out of reach and harm's way.

Looking almost affectionately at Jack, he at last broached the suggestion Jack had been slowly and patiently working up to.

"Misser Moore," he said, "I'll play you who pays for two more drinks, but I'll play you once round cribbage board for them. And I'll go double or quits for the hunner an' fifty at the same time."

The details of that game are needless—there's quite enough tragedy in the world without them. But anyway at the end of fifteen minutes the captain was struggling manfully to write a check for three hundred pounds.

"'S no use, Misser Moore," he pitifully explained after several attempts. "Can't write sheck. Hand won't stand still and make siggature."

"Never mind about that, captain," said Jack, coming to the rescue. "I'll soon fix it. I'll hold your hand while you sign."

And knowing quite well that once the captain had put his name down he wouldn't go back on it, between the two of them they made a pretty fair job.

It was no use suggesting more cards as well was best left alone, so for a time both sat drinking industriously and watching the games of others in the crowd. One in process of formation seemed to Jack to offer possibilities.

The secretary of the Stock Exchange, the manager of one of the banks and two business men were having a heated though friendly argument as to which could reach the farthest. Eventually each put up five pounds, the man with the longest reach to take the lot.

The rules of the competition were simple, though difficult for a man with half a hundred whiskies hidden in his person. A chalk line was drawn on the floor. The competitor had to toe it, then go down on his left hand as far as he could reach, reach as far past his head as he could and make a chalk mark. But he wasn't allowed to touch the floor with his chest or any part of his body.

To Jack's mind there was a certain element of hope of speculation in the game. He silently gave instructions to one of his friends, then leaned over to the captain and confided to him his scheme.

"Captain," he explained, "you must take a hand in this. You're at least six inches taller than any of them, and you ought to be able to reach a foot farther than they can. Have a shot at it and we'll see if we can't get a few bets on you."

The captain was game and put up his five, and the sport was on. So was the betting. And after the first four men had made their marks he was open to bet any part of a hundred pounds he could beat the lot. And so he could—on occasions.

Jack himself was careful not to offer any suggestion of a bet, but friends of his were not long in getting down two fifties with the captain. Then the show began.

With great precision the captain toed the line, very carefully secured the eyeglass and intently looked at the marks the others had made. Then with a couple of fancy preliminary swings he went down—and out. The moment his hand reached past the other chalk marks, which it easily could by more than twelve inches, his chest came down with a bump on the floor.

"My shest slipped," he explained as he got up. "Got to try again."

And as each man had three chances he did. A second time his "shest slipped," but the third time he managed it and slowly, carefully stretched body and arm to the limit and made his mark.

Several of the crowd cheered; the captain smiled his widest and essayed to rise. But going down on the floor with a cargo of liquor for ballast and lifting that same cargo up again are two quite different things. Though he swung and wriggled and tried in every possible way a man can to make a human body get enough momentum into itself to spring up he was stuck to the floor as tightly as a fly to fly paper. And in a couple of minutes the inevitable happened; his "shest slipped" again. But the eyeglass never once moved through it all.

Laboriously with the aid of Jack's steadying hand the captain signed two fifty-pound checks.

"I know wha's matter with me," he commented. "Need exercise. Going in to play billiards."

And without any further chance of being rooked just then he wandered through the bar and into the crowded billiard room.

THE mob of drinking, gambling, arguing men remained, but Jack sat alone. Perhaps he had reckoned to call it a day; perhaps he was tired, perhaps simply ruminating. To him fleecing the captain in such outrageous fashion was a perfectly honorable way of making a living—quite commendable in fact. And yet in his heart of hearts he actually liked the man—everybody did—and would have pawned his shirt to help him if need be. 'Tis the way of human beings. Human beings are curious, and Jack knew it only too well; and that's how he reckoned to make things go always.

For quite a while he sat alone and drank alone, and no invitation to join in anything seemed to appeal to him. He simply watched the crowd, watched each man and analyzed each man. This man a crook, this man a fool, this man mean, this man easy. Some living on

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relatives, some black sheep, some spending more money than they previously thought existed, some spending thousands and yet considering themselves broke. A few with titles they hoped to forget, a few heirs to titles they didn't deserve. One or two out-and-out bad, one or two the essence of good nature.

Gradually his eyes went all round the room and took every one in until they came to the boy in the corner. Then they rested on him.

What of the boy in the corner? He was frankly puzzled with him and stared long and dreamily. What indeed could a kid like that be doing in that case-hardened crowd?

The boy looked up and smiled. The smile was catching; Jack smiled back.

"Hallo, Fred. What are you doing here this time of night, or rather morning?" he asked.

In answer the boy only smiled the more broadly.

"Jack, you're a crooked, flint-hearted old heathen," he said.

And as he said it he got up and came over and took the chair opposite Jack.

"Jack," he continued teasingly, "I often wonder why they let an old shark like you live. Don't you?"

"I do sometimes," Jack agreed good-humoredly; "but I suppose I must have some use in nature and the order of things or I shouldn't be allowed to be here. You know, boy, if there was no bad there'd be no good because there'd be nothing to compare by."

"That's right too," the boy assented. "And if there were no fools there'd be no wise men. And if I wasn't a fool I wouldn't be here."

"What's troubling you now, Fred?" Jack asked. "All the evening whilst I've been playing and drinking I've been watching you and you've kept to yourself all the time. Not been drinking much either."

"No," replied the boy, "and I'm not going to drink. And so soon as I can I'm going to get back out on the veld and away from this aimless crowd."

Jack looked at him quizzically.

"Girl?"

The boy nodded.

"I thought so," said Jack. "We all get it sooner or later. But a fellow like you ought to be old enough to get over it. How old are you anyway?"

"Twenty-three," the boy told him frankly.

"Twenty-three; a grown, matured, experienced man of the world—and you're worrying over a girl. Lovesick and homesick for a girl. I suppose you'll be booking your passage soon and slipping off to her and letting your chances in this growing country go skittering to blazes. Nice business man you'll ever make."

The boy looked at him half-pityingly, half-angrily.

"Jack, you old fool," he said, "if you weren't such a dilapidated old crook I'd tell you all about it. You've got it and me upside down."

Jack's inside eyes went back thirty years, and he looked at the boy tenderly, almost affectionately.

"Tell me," he said. "Perhaps I've been through it all myself."

Their eyes met, and for a moment each searched the other's inmost soul.

"I've half a mind I would," the boy assented slowly; then almost to himself he continued. "It's —— to be in a town with eight hundred men, not one of whom is as young as yourself."

"You're right," agreed Jack; "and you feel you want to tell some one and yet you daren't because you're afraid they'll laugh at you. If you could only tell some one it would relieve your mind, eh? Isn't that it, Fred?"

The boy's eyes brightened.

"How did you guess that, Jack?" he earnestly queried.

Again the inside eyes went back thirty years, and there was a touch of regret in his voice.

"I didn't start out in life as a professional gambler," said Jack, "and I didn't take to living off other men from choice. You can fill in the rest yourself.

"And so you've tired of the crudeness and roughness of life here, eh, boy, and you want to go home to the girl? Well, I don't blame you."

The boy seemed annoyed, seemed to think Jack's apparent denseness was studied.

"You were never farther off in your life, Jack," he declared. "You're off your horse completely. I don't want to go to the girl."

"'Nother man pinched her off you?" Jack suggested.

The boy's face clouded.

"That will never happen," he asserted fiercely. "She doesn't come under that heading."

"What is it then? Postponed it indefinitely? Called it off? What?" Jack persisted.

"That's just the difficulty. Much though I love her I wish she'd do either of those things," the boy declared. "The trouble is she's coming here."

JACK'S eyes opened wide and remained opened; then his lips pursed and he let out a shrill whistle. Then he turned sharply to the bar and shouted—

"Smasher, bring two stiff whiskies, quick."

Turning back to the boy, his lips still pursed as if to whistle and his eyes still wide open as if in alarm, he sat for a minute or so in utter silence. Silently once more he grinned, and sheepishly the boy grinned too.

"And so she's coming here and you're afraid to introduce her to your acquaintances," Jack took up the conversation again.

"Wouldn't you be?" the boy asked earnestly. "Eight hundred men in town—eight hundred

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ardened men of the world—and only four
omen. *Those* four women."

"It certainly isn't a very bright outlook for
n unsophisticated young lady," Jack admitted.

"It certainly is not," emphasized the boy,
and you'd say so a thousand times more if you
new her. She was nineteen when I saw her
st—she's just of age now—and she promised
e faithfully that at the end of two years she'd
me out to Africa and we'd get married. In
very letter from her in all those two years she's
oken again of the time she was coming out;
every letter I've written to her I've men-
oned her coming out.

"And I'm afraid I haven't quite told the
uth; have glossed things over and made the
wn and the life better than they really were.
felt I didn't dare tell her how we lived. And
e letter from her yesterday said that in six
ore weeks she'd be here."

"It's a bit of a muddle at best," Jack mused.
There's no place to put her, and outside of
e or two farmer's wives miles away there are
white women for her to associate with. I
rtainly can't say I envy her. Can't you
op her?"

"That's just it, Jack," the boy said ner-
ously. "It may sound silly to a man of your
e, Jack, but I'm sure you won't laugh at
e. That's the worst of it. I love her so
uch and long for her and her company so
uch that I can't bring myself to stop her.
"I know it's selfish, and my selfishness haunts
e and keeps me awake at night, yet I can't
rce myself to finally say, 'Don't come.' Yet
ve written a letter saying that very thing, and
is moment I'm carrying it in my pocket, trying
get up nerve enough to drop it in the mail."
Jack held out his hand.

"Give it to me," he said. "I'll attend to it
d see it goes out by the coach in the morning."

"No," the boy persisted firmly. "If I hang
yself I'll go to my own funeral. All I've
en sitting here all the evening for was to
y and disgust myself sufficiently to send it
. I've pretty nearly done it."

"Why don't you sell out and go to another
rt of the country, Fred?" Jack suggested.

"Because I can't very well," the boy ex-
ained. "You see, Jack, the girl's been
ought up in every form of luxury, and now
e's of age she's enormously rich. I never
d much, but I swore I'd make good. I
rnt all I could about mining engineering,
d the claims I have are just beginning to
y me well. If I sold them and went else-
ere I'd have to start all over again at
mething I don't understand and shouldn't
e. This free mining life gets into one's
ul."

"And turns the girl out," Jack grinned.
ou're a beauty."

"No, Jack, never that," the boy said sol-
emnly; "but I'm not going to be dog enough
to let her come out here until we get a bit
more civilized. I'd rather miss her and long
for her hopelessly all my life than sentence her
to this existence."

Jack laughed heartily.

"Ever hear the story of the magnet and the
poor little bit of steel that thought it had a
will of its own?" he asked.

IT WAS past one in the morning, and the crowd was not a single man the less. In fact it had grown. One by one new men had come in, and the last man in was an auctioneer. Auctioneer of cattle and horses by day and of women by night. After a round of drinks and a second round he turned to the crowd and announced in a business-like manner—

"Now, boys, let's get out on the square; the girls are all there waiting."

Quite as a matter of course the whole crowd trooped out to the Market Square. Jack and the boy went with them. To each the event was nothing; they'd seen it night after night; but like other human beings they went where the crowd went just because they went.

In the bright African moonlight everything was almost as clear as day. There in the center of the Market Square was an auctioneer's rostrum. Beneath it with flimsy clothing flapping in the cool night breeze stood the four women. The women who put themselves up to auction.

There was no ribaldry, no joking, no foolery about it at all. For each one the bidding started quickly and mounted quickly. Twenty-five pounds, thirty, forty, fifty, seventy-five, a hundred, a hundred and fifty.

Bah! What was money? Pieces of useless paper that bought nothing but liquor, gambling and scenes like this. In ten minutes the sale was over and the crowd, all but four, wandered carelessly back to the hotel.

Jack and the boy walked together, for a while walked silently. Both were thinking intently. At the foot of the steps to the hotel the boy halted and put his hand on Jack's arm. Jack too came to a halt.

Quickly, as if he were afraid he might change his mind, the boy took a letter from his pocket, hastily licked the gummed flap and stuck it down.

"Put it in the post and see it goes on today's coach, Jack," he said. And Jack took it.

But as it happened that day's coach never went. Nor a coach for many a long day after.

JACK and the boy kept together all that night. Neither felt inclined for sleep, so they decided to stick it out with the rest of the mob. But after a couple of drinks in the bar parlor things got too hot

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for even them, and they went on through to the billiard room.

That too was crowded, but most of the crowd was sitting interestedly watching the game. And what a game!

When the captain said all he needed was exercise, fuddled as he was he knew exactly what he was talking about. Continually walking round the table had pulled him together and sobered him, and what he was doing to those pool-players was absolutely wicked.

The game was running at a pound a ball when he broke in, and he had lost a little; but as the night wore on the stake had gradually increased till now it was five pounds a ball.

And the captain and his eyeglass had every one of those innocent, docile little balls completely mesmerized. They'd get up and dance for him or come and eat out of his hand. Every pocket in his clothes was bulging with five-pound notes, and the three-hundred-pound check and the two fifties were the least of his troubles.

Jack and the boy sat scarcely speaking all the rest of the night. Except for an occasional bet on a particular shot neither uttered a sound.

Gradually the night wore on until a faint glimmer away at the back of 'Tabas Induna proclaimed that day was fast approaching. One by one the spectators rose and meandered out to the Market Square ready for the morning market. Business had to be done before the sun got too high and the day too hot.

The sun had barely risen and the Market was scarcely half over when a rider was noticed coming up from the direction of the Maatschemschlope River. For a man to ride all night and get in first thing in the morning was nothing unusual, but this horse was caked with dry sweat, and horse and man seemed weary to death; yet the man appeared strangely excited.

At Tattersall's Hotel he got stiffly off, dropped the reins to the ground and went in for a drink. As he came out every one in the hotel, bartenders and all, came out with him and rushed frantically yelling into the crowd.

All were yelling the same thing at once:

"The Matabele are out. The Matabele are out. They've risen and murdered every white man, woman and child in sight. Quick; we've got to form *laager* and defend ourselves."

Some ran hurriedly away to arm; others crowded round the horseman to hear his story, to get the horrible details. All were crazy with excitement.

And as he told them all he knew they grew crazier, then angrier, then madly angry. The first white killed was Tom Maddocks, a prospector, and his own Kaffirs had knocked him on the head and killed him mercifully because they liked him. But the others!

The few corpses he'd seen had been mutilated beyond recognition, and the tortures that had been inflicted—a million nightmares could not commence to express a fraction of them. The women, always the women were tortured worst.

When he found that the rising was general he'd gone to the house of a farmer friend to warn him and had found father, mother and eight children tortured and dead. After that he'd left the road, and by riding all night had managed to get in, but how he'd been lucky enough to escape he didn't know.

During the day three more men came into town, and those were all that remained alive of the hundred and thirty-seven known to be out. And when later troops were formed and sent out in the hope of rescuing stragglers all they found was the remains of parts of corpses, or bleached skeletons pegged down close to ant-hills.

All Bulawayo was busy that day and for many a long day after. Practically every Kaffir had slipped away and joined his own tribe and the few that remained were almost useless. The whites had to do everything.

All the wagons on the Commonage and all wagons in town were brought into the Market Square and formed into a hollow square. Outside the wagons a *scherm* of *wachtenbeetje* bush—bush with straight thorns three to six inches long—had been hastily thrown together. And inside the square those who lived on the straggling outskirts of the town had erected tents or any kind of shelter they could lay hands on and had collected pots and pans and blankets and the various utensils necessary to hold them during a siege.

Work! It was work in a hurry those first few days. Gambling was forgotten; vice was forgotten; only the bars and the drinks kept busy. And alongside the men, working quietly as the men and asking no one's assistance, were the women of the town.

For months that town remained in *laager* and on the alert. Three-fourths of the able-bodied men had volunteered to go out and fight, and troops were formed and did almost superhuman work. But men had to stay in the town and defend the town, for without it the whites had no headquarters.

Rations got low, and there were no Kaffirs to cook them. The women went from tent to tent and wagon to wagon and helped in the cooking.

Clothing got dirty and vermin-infected, and there were no Kaffirs to wash it. The women took it to the river and washed it.

Things got torn or worn out. The women repaired and patched them. And when a man got sick the first person to come and give a hand was one of the unholy four. Women are always women deep down in their souls.

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Jack and the boy palled together, for it seems as if the strange friendships of life mostly turn out the firmest. Between them they shared a bell-top tent. Two stretchers; a packing-case for table and all other furniture combined; on top of the packing-case the photo of a girl. Leaning against the pole of the tent within easy reach of both were two Lee-Metford rifles.

Jack was sitting moralizing as was his wont.

"It's getting mighty monotonous, isn't it, Fred?" he was saying. "The same half-rations of the same kind of food every day. Never a word from the outside world. Nothing to read and nothing to do except occasional sentry duty. It's fierce."

"It might be worse, but not much," the boy answered wearily. "My worst trouble is that I don't get any letters and don't know if she ever landed or where she is. The railroad six hundred miles away might as well be six million miles for all the use it is to me."

But Jack's troubles were still uppermost in his own mind.

"I'm just about tired of going to bed nights," he continued, "and not knowing if I'll ever wake up at all or find myself tied to a tree when I do wake. And the women—I wonder if they ever get to sleep."

The boy smiled wisely.

"I don't think they need any pity, Jack," he explained. "They're the happiest people in the *laager*. For once in their lives they're busy and doing good, and they enjoy it. I know it. The woman who comes and cleans up every day told me so."

"God help the poor creatures if the Kaffirs ever rush us and get them all the same," said Jack earnestly, and he got up and wandered out.

THE boy sat still and waited. Every morning at a regular time the woman had come quietly and fixed things for them, made their beds, swept out and started their cooking. It was her time now, and he looked anxiously for her. At first he had almost resented her coming; then he felt thankful for it and looked on her as a pal; now he regarded her almost as a mother.

The things she'd done for him and done so unostentatiously! As she told him, he was only a kid amongst these hardened old-timers and he needed extra looking after. She didn't like his bedding, and from some mysterious place she'd obtained better; she thought him getting thin on half-rations, and from another mysterious source produced an extra allowance; and once when he was sick for a couple of days although the hospital was paying three pounds a dozen for eggs she had fed him on eggs.

Eventually in his lonesomeness he'd told her the story of the girl, and she, poor soul, sitting opposite him had for the first time in her memory found an eager and sympathetic listener to the story of her life. As with him the mere telling of it had eased her mind.

A quick step outside, and like a breath of sunshine the woman entered the tent. For once she was finding herself, had a place in the universe; and it had quite transformed her.

But this morning her face was unusually serious.

"Hello, boy," she greeted. "How's my young son this morning?"

"Fine but lonely," he told her.

"I'm afraid we won't be lonely long, boy," she went on. "I've good news and bad. The Kaffirs are getting badly licked and are almost at the end of their tether."

"That's mighty cheering," the boy exclaimed. "I don't see anything bad about that."

"I do," she said. "They're so near the end that they're desperate, and they're going to make one final effort. The effort's going to be made on us, and we've less men in *laager* than we've ever had."

The boy wasn't impressed at all. He'd never seen a solid wall of ox-hide shields with naked, blood-thirsty savages howling behind them advancing on him.

"Oh, I think we can hold them off easy enough," he asserted. "There's the *scherm* and the line of wagons to pass before they reach us, and we can pick most of them off before they get by those."

The woman was still serious.

"Laddie, you don't know it all," she told him. "Death to them means nothing, and they'll keep coming on. We've none too much ammunition, and our only remaining Maxim gun is out of commission. Sit down. I think we'd better talk."

Obediently the boy sat down; her seriousness was beginning to penetrate.

"Boy," she continued, "there's a big chance that one or other or both of us may never get out of this alive. We'd better fix things up."

He looked at her wonderingly.

"There's not a man in this benighted camp that I can trust except you," she confided. "There's not a man here I've ever had a human conversation with or one who even thinks I am human. In case I go there are many things I'll need attended to, and only you can help me. Will you do it?"

"Certainly I'll do it," the boy assented eagerly. "I'd do anything possible on earth for you."

"You must understand that I've made lots of money in this town," she told him. "I own houses, lots and farms. I've wagons and oxen, and I've money in the bank.

"For years I've supported a sister and nephews and nieces in Europe, and they've never known how I made the money. I want to still support them."

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The boy nodded.

"If they get me," she instructed him quietly, "I want you to sell everything and invest the money in some civilized country and see they get the income. But you must never tell them anything of me — and this town. Will you?"

"Do you think I'm a dog like that?" the boy replied almost angrily.

"No, laddie," she said, "or I shouldn't have made out this power of attorney in your name. And now, boy, in case you're the one how about you?"

Serious though the conversation had been the idea of getting killed had somehow not got into the boy's thoughts at all. For a moment he sat silently trying to figure it out. The woman settled it for him.

"I'll do the same for you if you'll get things ready," she suggested. "And I'll sell all for you if you wish and settle everything. And I'll find the girl and see everything is handed to her. I'd dearly like to meet her myself, but that can never be. She and I live in two different worlds."

"By Jove!" the boy exclaimed, trying to be cheerful. "You've almost put a scare into me. All I've been thinking about lately was waiting quietly till somebody came and helped us out. I never thought of being attacked or of any danger.

"I'll certainly get the paper fixed up, and I'll also write letters home in case of accident. You've made me somewhat jumpy, little mother."

The woman's eyes took on a tender, far-away look. Like old Jack Moore, perhaps her inside eyes were looking back—back twenty years or more. Perhaps "little mother" brought up memories thought long since dead.

"Laddie," she said at last, "have you a photo you can spare a silly old woman? I'd like yours now; if you go I'll take hers then.

"But I think you won't go. You're a clean-living fellow and you're meant for her. She was born for you."

The woman cleaned up and tidied round, then, finished, stood for a moment holding the flap of the tent.

"I'm going now," she told the boy, looking thoughtfully into his eyes. "I'll be back for the paper this afternoon."

Then she tapped the revolver on her hip and added still more thoughtfully:

"Boy, there are six in there, and I'm a pretty good shot. If they charge us I'll get five anyway. The sixth cartridge was made for me."

For an instant she hesitated as if seeing something in her mind. Then she added fiercely—

"Those devils will never get me alive, that's one absolutely sure thing."

THAT night was a night of nights—a night ever to be remembered. The wind blew a gale—a regular tornado—blew everything before it into a hopeless jumble. Tents were blown flat or carried away, wagons were overturned and the *wachtenbeetje* bush piled in heaps against the houses.

Though every living being in town was struggling and helping to put things right when the wind died down just before daybreak the square was as clear of defense as a billiard table. Just a few isolated wagons stood where they had originally been placed.

And then it happened.

A few stray shots and shouts of warning, and the Kaffirs were upon them. A solid mass of yelling, shrieking, blood-smeared fiends ten deep. Rushing madly up, their shields appeared almost to make an unbroken line with just fierce eyes and waving plumes above them. And *assegais* were flying and falling in all directions.

The boy stood firing blindly into the oncoming crowd, and in the excitement and horror of it all he was dimly aware of old Jack Moore standing beside him and carefully plugging away. A moment later he sensed the woman standing close to his right shoulder calmly firing a Lee-Metford, and it seemed as if a quiet voice, clear through the hideous din, murmured in his ear—

"Good-by, laddie."

Next instant an *assegai* got him in the leg and he went down. And as he fell another got him in the arm and pegged him firmly to the ground. The Kaffirs were above him and all over him and past him.

He saw the woman drop her rifle, saw her draw her revolver, saw yelling, howling, glistening savage bodies surging round her with *assegais* upraised. Then he heard her fire quickly one, two, three, four, five times.

And they had her, had gripped her, and, threatening her with spears and knobkerries, were heading her away. She was helpless; they had caught her, and caught her alive.

It was all over in just a few seconds. The boy had struggled to rise, had seen her taken, and the horror had taken the remaining strength from him. He just lay there in a sickly daze.

They had run her a dozen yards and she apparently had scarcely protested. In a hazy way the boy wondered why. Then like a flash he saw it all.

With a quick, unexpected movement the woman had thrown aside the Kaffir holding her right arm. With just as quick a movement she raised the revolver with the last remaining cartridge. And with her last atom of strength on earth she fired. Fired her sixth shot desperately yet deliberately.

And she fired the shot at him.

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IN THE corridor of a private hospital in Rondebosch two nurses were standing chatting.

"Such a shame it is," the one was saying. "Yesterday the doctor said there was a fighting chance but it was almost hopeless; he might never regain the use of his mind or speak or know any one. And she's such a dear girl too."

"It is a shame, "the other rejoined. "It's always the best get hurt or killed and the useless ones remain. But can you wonder at him?"

"No," said the first speaker. "They tell me that when the woman saw him fall and saw he was wounded and pinned down she feared the Kaffirs would get him and torture him. With the bullet she'd kept for herself she tried to kill him."

"Did she hit him, Bess?" the other girl inquired.

"It's hard to say; he was wounded and hacked in so many places," Bess explained. "One thing I thank God for; when the Kaffirs saw they were beaten and turned to retreat they killed her instantly to save losing her."

"Then he must have seen her die," the other girl assumed.

"Yes," said Bess, "and seeing it saved his life, for he fainted and the Kaffirs, thinking he was dead, passed over him without ripping him up."

"Well, you never know the hero stuff there is in some women, do you?" soliloquized the other girl. "And to think he's been here five whole months and done nothing in all that time but stare vacantly at the scenery. Too bad. Well, I must amble on."

Bess walked down the corridor to the door leading to the veranda, her rubber-soled shoes making not a sound. She meant to take just one look at her patient and see that all was well. See that he was comfy. But at the door she stood stock still. And for a moment she kept on standing stock still.

A sound behind her told her the other girl was coming out of a room. Turning, she raised her hand and beckoned to the girl, at the same time signaling silence. Together they stood and quietly watched the man.

An open magazine was on his knees; his eyes were fixed on the distant slopes of Table Mountain; his hands were clasped under his chin; and he was slowly but emphatically saying to himself:

"A —— good story. A —— good story."

Without a sound the two girls walked up behind him, and one stood on each side his chair. With a startled grin he looked up first at one and then the other, then smiled from ear to ear.

"When I woke up just now," he said, "I thought I was in heaven and—" looking from face to face mischievously— "if it wasn't for old Table Mountain over there I'd really believe I was."

The girls laughed merrily and said nothing.

"Where am I anyway?" he inquired. "I know by the mountain I'm somewhere near Cape Town, but where?"

"In Rondebosch," said Bess, "in a private hospital. You've been here five months and two months in hospital in Bulawayo getting stitched up."

He looked horrified.

"And have I been out of the world all that time?" he asked.

"Not quite out of the world, boy," Bess assured him. "The girl's been here every blessed day the whole five months, and she's booked your passage to take you home two weeks from now. She was going to look after you all the rest of your life herself."

"The girl?" he said joyously.

"Yes, the girl; and she's about due here now," announced Bess.

Instantly his hand went to his chin and he felt the stubble. Next second he was on his feet looking for a mirror.

"Think I'd better chirk up a little, hadn't I?" he explained.

The two girls looked at each other knowingly and laughed.

"Just as human as any other two-legged man, isn't he? It takes more than a mess of niggers to knock the vanity out of some people," was the way Bess summed it up.

A WEEK later the boy and the girl walked up the drive of Groote Schuur, the home that Cecil Rhodes loved so dearly. Together they passed through the glorious gardens, passed the wonderful old house, climbed the hill and stood at the crest of the horseshoe.

So sublime the picture, so enchanting, that neither spoke. The smell of roses, myriads of roses, filled the air. All in the horseshoe was one mass of brilliant bloom.

For a while they stood quietly side by side enjoying it all, enjoying a scene unrivaled in the world.

The boy broke the silence at last.

"What a wonderful man Rhodes was," he said almost reverently. "A man who did big things in a big way. A man who dreamed in continents.

"Even here, dear, he did things in a big way too. Do you know that at one time there wasn't a rose in these gardens, and he suddenly took a fancy to some he had seen? Then he ordered twenty thousand rose-trees of every obtainable variety and had them planted. Always big, big, big."

The girl looked at him with glowing eyes.

"I too always want to do big things," she said. "Big things and good. You know,

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Fred, now I'm of age my money is all my own to do as I like with, and I can never, never, never use it all."

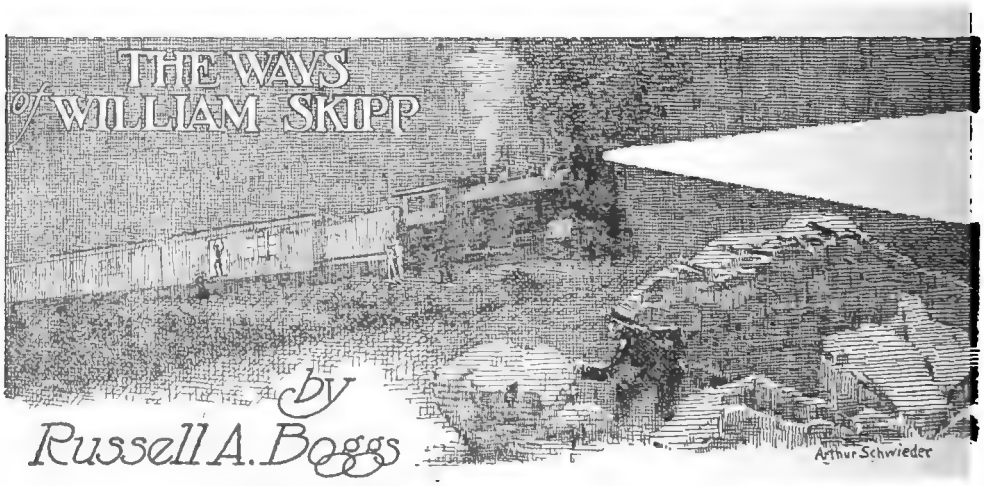
The boy hesitated.

"What's your idea? Have you ever planned anything that way?" he asked her.

"Oh, yes, yes, yes," she exclaimed enthusiastically. "Lots of things. One thing I'm going to do for certain. I've been reading a lot about vice in the slums of some of the big cities and the awful life women lead there. I'm going to found a home for fallen women."

The boy turned her to him, put a hand on each shoulder and looked searchingly into her eyes. There was a world, a huge vast world of meaning in that look.

"Dearest," he said almost fiercely, more fiercely than she had ever heard him speak before, "there are no fallen women. Build rather a home for fallen, helpless, miserable men."



Author of "Old Fellows," "The Wild and Woolly East," etc.

FROM the very first day of his service with the D. & I. at McGill tower Bill Skipp had felt that he had made a mistake. This Thursday afternoon as he sat in Division Operator Massey's office he knew beyond question that he had. He never should have signed up with the D. & I. He waited patiently while Massey turned round, cold eyes upon him in a disapproving stare.

"So I guess that's about all we'll want with you, Mr. Skipp," said the division operator in a flat, rather complacent voice.

"You're through."

He frowned slightly.

"Have you anything to say further?"

It was easily gathered however, that he wished to hear nothing further.

Mr. Skipp meditatively rubbed his right ear while he looked across the room from Massey, his judge, to Dispatcher Ellett, his accuser. Ellett, hawk-nosed and thin-faced, was clearly not perfectly at ease; his hands were restless, his eyes kept darting nervously about.

Between him and the solemn division operator young Bill became conscious of a sudden desire for mirth. He left off rubbing his ear; his eyes grew hard, sparkling.

"Only this," he said evenly in answer to Massey. "Mr. Ellett is a perfect liar. Aside from that I expect it would be all right to accept at par what he says."

Massey's jaw dropped, giving his face a vacant expression that reminded Skipp of nothing so much as a fish out of water gasping for breath. Nervous Ellett bounced upright in his chair. Bill was pleasantly impressed with the effect of his bombshell.

The particular thing which had irked him during the few brief weeks of his connection with the D. & I. had been that the general attitude of those who governed the road had been assured, impregnable superiority. Judgments rendered, he had been given to understand, were infallible, and the character of those who judged and governed impeccable. Regard for authority Skipp had always possessed as long as it did not clash too strongly with his self-respect.

There were, however, limits.

"Be careful!" Ellett was ejaculating excitedly. "Be care——"

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Bill Skipp aimed his forefinger like a gun at the dispatcher.

"Be quiet!" he ordered curtly. "Be quiet, and sit down."

Ellett, probably wisely, did both. Bill's eyes certainly were snapping.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" remonstrated Massey.

His tone was apprehensive, pleading. He'd had a sudden feeling that big Bill Skipp might start to tear things wide open. Skipp's unexpected assumption of masterfulness was a trifle disconcerting.

"Don't worry," returned Bill, looking at the division operator. "Everything'll be all right, unless your friend here interrupts. If he does I'll grab him by the left leg and throw him down the stairs."

Skipp bent his hard gaze on Ellett. The dispatcher sagged down on his chair.

"I want to add," went on Skipp, again addressing Massey, "that when Ellett says I deliberately provoked him while on duty, that I deliberately took pains to annoy him by delaying my OS's, by being slow to answer his calls, by making him repeat instructions—by all that tommy-rot, why, he just plain lies.

"The truth is, Ellett does everything to provoke his operators. I've repeated OS's to him three, four—a half-dozen times. I've answered his calls and then waited any time he felt like making me, before he'd say what he wanted. He'd change his instructions a dozen times in an hour—and so on and so forth."

Skipp paused a second while he looked sternly at Massey.

"Yes, it's true," he declared grimly; "every word I'm telling you. The trouble is, though, he's got all the operators along the line buffaloed. They're nearly all home-guards anyway and when he bulldozes them they're afraid to peep.

"I was a new man, and when he found his tricks didn't work any too well with me it made him all the worse. The limit came the other day when the bulldozer started to say things no man can say to me and get away with. I called him, sharp and quick."

Skipp smiled a little.

"I guess some of the things I said hurt his pride, so he came running and told you about it."

Bill again paused. This meekness of the home-guards had been another thing which had made him restive. Browbeaten men, they had bowed supinely and without question before even the most harsh declarations and promulgations of those above. He contemplated the shrinking Ellett.

"You little skunk!" said Bill quietly, but with an earnestness which more than compensated for mere vociferation, "I've worked on a good many lines and run up against a good many specimens, but you beat the worst. There's nothing I'd like better than to take you in hand and rearrange these office fittings with you."

He glanced up at the office clock.

"It'll not take long," he said hopefully. "Just a very few minutes."

"Be calm, gentlemen!" spluttered Massey, all a-flutter again. "Let there be no trouble."

Skipp spread his hands in a motion of supreme disgust.

"TROUBLE!" he said disdainfully. "Not with this creature! The only time he talks rough is when some odd miles of telegraph wire separate him and the man he talks to."

He regarded Ellett as if waiting for the dispatcher to speak. But the dispatcher didn't.

"Do you know," abruptly said Bill to Massey "I wouldn't wonder but what something's the matter with him. He'll crack some day; you'll see. He's under a strain; something's on his mind. Mark what I say: You'd better keep your eye on him."

"This is most extraordinary," ventured Massey with some return of his old air of authority. "A most unusual manner of speaking."

"Very likely," agreed Bill calmly. "But you just take a glance at Ellett. Doesn't he look like he had the pip, or some other agitating disease?"

The division operator took a glance at the dispatcher. Certainly Ellett's agitation was most apparent. He was shifting and jerking about in his chair, his feet and hands seemingly never still. His uneasy eyes kept turning upon Skipp, their expression that of extreme ill-will.

"Don't believe him," muttered Ellett, rather feebly. "He's sore. It's hot air."

"Of course," said Massey reassuringly. "I understand his purpose perfectly."

"Oh, of course," said Skipp.

He laughed.

"Well, he's not just what you'd call a pretty picture, that's sure. His confidence seems all shot to—to pieces."

He twirled his hat.

"But all right. I'll have my time. Twenty-two dollars and seventy cents is the amount. How about it?"

The sight of Ellett's perturbation seemed to effect Massey. He fumbled hurriedly through some papers on his desk, found a yellow slip and passed it to Skipp.

"Here's your voucher," he said hastily. "Twenty-two seventy, as you said."

Skipp took the voucher with a little smile.

"Humph," he observed. "All made out and ready beforehand. This little investigation of yours then was plain farce; I was condemned before it started."

Massey suddenly colored, his face flushing a fiery red. In his confusion he'd done the

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wrong thing; he'd intended to make Skipp come back later for his pay. He cleared his throat, but could find nothing to say. Skipp waited, the ironical little smile hovering about his lips.

"Never mind," said Bill then. "I was fairly sure of it, anyway. When the lineup is a dispatcher against an operator it's always pretty safe to offer at least ten to one on the dispatcher."

He folded the yellow slip and put it in his pocket.

"I'd like a pass," he said. "A pass to some place a hundred or two miles farther west."

The division operator, angry at himself for his slip-up, contrived to find his tongue.

"Can't be done," he said bruskly.

"Won't be, you mean," said Skipp.

"The law forbids," said Massey.

Bill chuckled.

"If you're not the little joker. It's been done often and you know it. But never mind that, either. I'll go anyhow, and I'll pay no fare; you can gamble on that."

He moved toward the door.

"I know you regret to see me go," he said, pausing there. "But don't you fret; I'll get along someway."

He looked at Ellett, then winked gravely at Massey.

"Watch him," he said to the division operator, jerking his thumb at the dispatcher.

"He'll be breaking wide open some day; you'll see."

He opened the door and went out. Down the corridor he went, then down the two flights of steps which led to the first floor where was the Lamont depot of the D. & I.

"Beats all how a man will talk," he told himself as he went down the stairs. "I don't care. They deserved all they got, and more. They always prop each other up that way. The little weasel! He'd like to 've drawn and quartered me if he'd dared. Oh, hobbledehoy! I sure got under their skin some.

"Still and all, it didn't turn out very satisfactory. Of course I'm glad to get away from this bunch and I hope to die if I ever want to go back. But I hate to leave like this. Kicked out like some —— yellow cur. It's rotten. Otherwise I'd be going with great pleasure."

He reached the main floor, passed through the crowded waiting-room and came to the street. He stepped to the curb and there tarried a moment, arranging his plans while he surveyed the traffic moving on the busy little Western city's main thoroughfare. The noisy street-cars which passed were jammed with workers homeward bound after the day's labor.

"No use fussing about it, I guess," he decided with reference to his recent reflections. "It's all off. Let's see. I'll get this voucher cashed. Then directly I'll have some supper. Later on I'll go to bed somewhere, and tomorrow I'll climb some extra and beat it west through the hills."

He considered a moment longer.

"Yes, that sounds pretty good," he concluded "I'll work along that outline."

He was working along that outline when near midnight he passed down the fourth-floor hallway of a small, quiet hotel where he had secured a room for the night. A door directly ahead of him suddenly opened and a man stepped into the corridor. The rays of a nearby light fell on the man's face; it was Dispatcher Ellett.

So quickly had Ellett stepped out and so close had Skipp been to him that the latter had to stop abruptly to avoid a collision. Ellett, swiftly looking up, seemed strangely disconcerted to perceive who it was that had paused so near him. In his befuddlement he permitted the handle of the door to escape his grasp; still unlatched, it swung slowly open.

Within the brightly lighted room were revealed to Skipp two men, standing beside a small table placed close to one wall. The two men, like Ellett, appeared disturbed and annoyed; they flashed swift, uneasy glances at the dispatcher.

"Evening, Ellett," greeted Bill, more amused than anything else at the dispatcher's confusion. Ellett, he knew, being a second-trick dispatcher, went off duty at eleven P.M., so there seemed to be nothing so singular about the encounter. "You putting up here too?"

"N—no," stuttered Ellett. "That is, yes—yes, for tonight." Skipp looked in at the two strangers. One was tall and slender, dark-mustached. The other was of medium height, heavy-set, and he seemed habitually to hold his head to one side in a sort of listening posture. Bill grinned at the pair.

"He doesn't seem to know just whether he is or isn't," said Bill. "It's getting late; the matter ought to be decided. Better help him." And with that he stepped around Ellett and proceeded down the hall to his own room.

As he prepared to retire he gave some small, idle thought to the incident, chiefly as to why his coming should have caused such disconcertion to the trio. He dismissed it with the conclusion that it must have been the unexpectedness of his appearance.

"Or maybe Ellett was afraid I might hand him one," meditated Bill. "Oh, well, what's the difference?"

He crawled into bed and almost at once dropped off to sleep.

"I HATE to disturb you," said a voice, unmistakably sarcastic, "but I'll have to ask you to unload."

William Skipp, seated on the broad edge of a gondola, cast his eyes upward. There, on top

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of a box car directly ahead of the gondola, stood a brakeman. It was he who had addressed Skipp.

To let a passenger train pass, the west-bound extra freight had paused on a siding at the top of a long, steep grade. The passenger had gone and the freight was about to pull out on to the main line again.

It was Friday, and the sun hung low in the west, it wanting but an hour or so till dusk. Skipp looked at the bleak mountainside to his right, rising abruptly from the siding. The slope revealed nothing but some scattered trees of spruce and pine and many huge boulders.

He looked to his left. Forty feet below the right-of-way, sparkled a hustling mountain stream. Beyond that was a valley, long, narrow and barren. And at the far edge of the valley rose other hills, deserted and bleak as the one to his right.

"But the accommodations are so poor here," said Bill plaintively. "No hotel, no boarding-house—no nothing, absolutely."

The brakeman after a second's hesitation permitted a friendly grin to cover his face.

"Ain't it so!" he agreed. "But I'll tell you, boy; I'm saying this for your benefit. The bulls are on one of their clean-up campaigns. We'll pull into Rock Junction yard in half an hour and they'll pinch any rider they see on this extra. Get me?"

"Very clearly," affirmed Bill. "Thanks. But what am I to do? I can't live here."

"Wait till dark," advised the shack. "You'll get some drag; they all take this hill on low. You can dodge the police boys after night, see?"

"Yes, sir," responded Skipp. "I get your drift. Please have some more thanks."

"Don't mention it," said the affable trainman. "Might even hook on Number Eleven when she comes along in a couple hours—if you want to take a chance. You can catch 'er; she takes this grade easy too."

"If Eleven comes first, Eleven I'll take," declared Bill. "I don't object to passenger trains. After I'm on, the faster they go the better." He started to climb down from the gondola. "I don't want to stay 'round here longer than necessary. Too spooky. Somebody might come along and scare me."

The brakeman laughed.

"Guess you'd not be scared much," he asserted. "Not as long as you got that gun on the hip."

Bill's right hand slid around to his hip-pocket. He eyed the trainman with comical dismay.

"Does it show?" he inquired humorously. "Thought I had it pretty well covered."

"When you bend over," explained the man on the box car. He laughed again. "If the bulls saw that they'd take it away from you."

"I'm not so sure they would," demurred Bill. "Not easy anyway. You see, it's about my only baggage; I'd object hard to giving it up."

"I'll bet," assented the brakeman.

A shrill whistle sounded ahead and the extra began to move out of the siding. The trainman raised his hand in farewell.

"So long, pal! Good luck and pleasant dreams!"

"*Bon voyage!*" said Bill Skipp.

He watched the caboose click out onto the main line, saw the switch closed and a moment later saw the rear end of the train disappear around a not distant curve. He'd been the greater part of the day making it thus far—fifty-odd miles west of Lamont. A tiresome day, full of delays and waiting.

"Fierce luck," he said, not uncheerfully.

He looked about for a place to rest while he waited darkness and the next west-bound train.

Just below him, about mid-way between the tracks of the D. & I. and the little stream, he spied a particularly big boulder one side of which overhung its base, forming a sort of roof for any one who might care to rest there. Bill decided he'd care to.

"I'll try that," he said. "Looks smoother under there than any place I've seen around."

He scrambled down to the boulder and found that the place was passing fair. He kicked aside a few smaller rocks, procured an armful of spruce-boughs from an adjacent tree and spread them on the ground. He sank down upon his couch.

"I wonder if there'll be a drag come along ahead of Number Eleven, or if the fast cars will be first to show up? Don't know, but if a drag should come first I wouldn't take much and let it slide and stick right here till Eleven comes. This here slow-freight business does play the dickens with my disposition." He sighed as he stretched himself out. "That might be best—only, I hope she's on time. Anyway, I'm cranky and weary. I'll have a nap."

He did. It was twilight when he woke. He didn't know exactly what had made him open his eyes, for assuredly there was no sound of any approaching train. He listened. Then down below him he heard the sound of horses' feet and a slight jingling as of harness metal.

"Company," he grumbled and sat up.

He peered around the corner of his boulder with instinctive caution.

"Two men a-horseback," he observed, perceiving a pair of riders draw rein at the edge of the stream below. The spot where they paused was not over three rods from Skipp's shelter.

Dusk was coming on fast, but there still was sufficient light for Bill at that distance to discern fairly the faces of the two horsemen. One

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was of slight frame, dark-mustached. The other was heavy-set, and his head was cocked to one side, as if listening.

"Ho, ho!" softly ejaculated Bill. "Ho, ho! May I be dinged if I ain't saw you two gents afore. Quite a jump from that small Lamont hotel to this bosky dell, but here we are, gentlemen—here we are, all three of us. No, that's wrong; should be four. Now where is Mr. Ellett? Well, he's not in sight, that's sure. But anyhow things seem to be thickening up a bit. I wonder if this will be interesting?"

Bill laughed in silence, pleased with his whimsical ramblings. He was in fine fettle after his nap.

"Perhaps friend Ellett will drop in later," he rambled on. "Wouldn't that be funny though? Reckon not, though. He'll be busy in his coop about now—busy giving some poor op. Hades!"

The horsemen, while Bill kept up his ruminations and conjectures, had been glancing about first up at the track, then all around. The murmur of their voices reached Skipp but he was unable to catch any words. But from their gestures and actions he suspected they were seeking and debating in regard to some place of shelter or concealment for their horses, if not for themselves.

"By crummy, I believe they are going to stop off awhile," decided Bill. "Now isn't that queer? When they have horses you'd think they'd not want to catch one of these five-mile-an-hour freights.

"Yes, sir, they are getting off. And going to leave the cayuses down under those couple of spruces with the little bushes and that three-sided rock to hide 'em behind. Well, well, now what do you suppose?"

AS SKIPP'S remarks attested, the two horsemen had dismounted and had led their animals under some trees, located not far from where they had first paused. Bill, watching keenly, found that when men and horses had got fully under the protection of the two spruces they were completely hidden from sight. This was not odd, however, considering that it now was so near to darkness.

He kept his gaze fastened on the spot, nevertheless, his hopes of catching further glimpses of the men enhanced by the fact that the sky was crystal clear; there'd be a certain amount of illumination from the stars.

In the gloom he suddenly saw the two men, on foot, reappear. They approached the stream, hopped across it by means of some jutting stones lying in the bed, and came up the slope toward Skipp's friendly shelter.

"Just look at 'em," complained Bill. "I don't want to be bothered with visitors."

He reached back to his hip-pocket and made certain that the pistol there was unhampered and readily accessible. Somehow he was glad it was there; one never knew.

He had told the brakeman the weapon was about his only baggage. He had, however, one other article, in a coat pocket; it was a flat, nickel-plated, electric flash-light, small but powerful. He made certain that it was within reach also.

"Wonder if I better vacate this nook?" he cogitated. But he shook his head stubbornly. "No, sir; I saw it first. I'll stay right here."

The men drew near to the rock, their feet scuffling and kicking the loose stones as they came. Bill continued to peep carefully out. And then just as he felt sure they would stumble on him the twain stopped at the opposite side of the boulder.

"This'll do," said one of them. "We'll wait here till we hear her whistle."

Skipp ventured to stretch his head out far enough to perceive that it was the tall man speaking.

"How's that lantern?"

"All shipshape," returned the shorter and heavier man. "Think I'd better light up?"

"No," responded the first. "Lot's of time. Besides, we don't want to show any more light than necessary. Come on, we'll sit down and be comfortable. No use standin'."

The pair of heads which Skipp had rather indistinctly been able to see, abruptly disappeared in the darkness. He could hear the two men clearing a place whereon to rest. He stretched himself around the corner toward the far side of the rock, then lay down flat, listening.

"May as well get an earful," he thought. "Not polite, I know, but what they say sounds sort of mysterious-like. Who knows?"

He was all attention as the first man, apparently by this time seated to his satisfaction, spoke again—his voice low-pitched, yet clear enough for Bill to take in every word.

"If the dope's right and our luck holds good this'll not be such poor pickings."

"Yes. I s'pose there's no question but that Ellett ——"

This was the second man's voice. It was his companion who cut him short.

"Sh-h! Don't mention names!"

"Oh, shucks! Nobody'll hear."

"Probably not. But be careful anyway."

"Well, all right. I was going to say that I s'pose he's got the right line on the thing."

"Oh, sure; he's got it straight. Trust him. He has ways of finding out. The sixty thousand will be there; don't worry about that. All in one small bundle. That's the beauty of it—no bulky stuff to bother us on the getaway. Twenty thousand apiece! Not bad."

"Should say not! Seems to me, though, we're taking all the chances. Pretty soft for that dispatcher to ——"

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"Be careful, I tell you! Can't you keep from mentioning names and things?" The tall man was vexed.

The other man laughed; a bit uneasily, however.

"Oh, dang it! Excuse me again. But it is pretty soft for him. No hard work and no risk, as you might say, and still he shares the same as us."

"Well, why not? Didn't he pass us the tip; isn't it his scheme; didn't he dope the whole layout? If it wasn't for him we wouldn't know anything about that sixty thousand, would we? Fair enough, I'll say."

"Oh, I'm not kicking. It's all right with me if it is with you. Taking chances is our business." The second man's voice was conciliatory. "Don't you think it's about time for Number Eleven to be hitting the grade? Ought to hear her bugle pretty soon."

"I'll take a peek at my watch."

There was a little flare as if a match had been struck.

"About five minutes yet."

The flare died out.

"The ——! I wish it was time; I hate this waiting."

"Not jumpy, are you?" The words were lightly bantering.

The second man grunted.

"Jumpy? Not me! This is too old a stunt for me to be that."

"That's so," the first man agreed. "Well, it'll not be long now." The two voices fell silent.

Around the corner of the big rock Bill Skipp, after a moment's wait to ascertain if the speakers would resume, allowed himself to take a long deep breath. Then he exhaled it through his teeth in a sort of noiseless whistle. He drew back and propped himself up against his own side of the boulder.

"Ellett—two crooks—Number Eleven—sixty thousand dollars—a tip—share and share alike!"

The words jerked through his brain.

"Devil's delight! No wonder they had that confab in the Lamont hotel; no wonder they seemed disturbed—especially Ellett. There's only one answer to it all. William, this is a bad, wicked hold-up scheme! Yes, siree, a regular open-and-shut, old-fashioned hold-up!

"These gentlemen around the corner want sixty thousand dollars worth of other folks' money, and they're figuring on giving twenty thousand of it to my old friend Ellett. Now, if for no other reason, that alone would set me dead against the scheme. Think of Ellett with twenty thousand dollars."

Bill Skipp slowly stroked his right ear while he tried to think and plan.

" 'Tisn't right. That's too much money for the old dear. He'd crack for sure then."

He had a sudden illuminating thought.

"Why, darn it all, I bet this is what's been fussing him so lately. Bless his heart, I do believe it is."

He repressed a chuckle.

"Say, didn't I call the turn for that owl, Mr. Massey? Didn't I warn him Ellett had something on his brain? But I never thought of anything like this. Ellett, you sly rascal, you're even more of a cut-up than I gave you credit for."

FAR down the track to the east the whistle of a passenger train sounded. Quickly Bill stretched around the rock again, once more listening.

"There she blows," said the voice of the tall, thin man on the other side. "Light up!"

"Light up it is," responded the other.

Once more a match flared. A slightly reddish glow was visible. A red lantern had been lit, doubtless.

"All ready," announced the last speaker. "I'll swing 'er down, eh?"

"All right," replied the first man. "Remember what you're to do, now. When she stops you look after the engineer and fireman. Make 'em get down and bring 'em back to the express car. I'll be there."

"I'm hep," declared the second.

"Good enough," said the first. "Go ahead then. We want to be up on that track when she comes in sight."

As the men moved away Skipp crawled farther forward and peered after them. It was a red lantern that one of them carried and in the subdued light of it he could see four legs climbing up the slope toward the D. & I. tracks.

"What'll I do?" Bill asked himself. "Try to bust up the show?"

Number Eleven's whistle roared again and he knew he'd have to speed up his decision. He reflected rapidly.

"About two shots and three yells would send 'em kiting," he ruminated. "But Judas, that wouldn't get me anything."

He was struck by this latter observation. Did he want to get anything out of this? Thought of his feud with Ellett and of Ellett's connection with the twain with the lantern pressed upon him afresh.

Something of a plan, sudden and pleasing, abruptly flashed into his head. He felt of his pistol and the little electric light in his pocket. He smiled.

"Just let 'em go ahead!" he exclaimed joyously. "I s'pose I'm a callous body, but I've always hankered to see a really hold-up. This looks like my chance. And then afterward I can go to work."

Number Eleven by that time could be heard near at hand, making heavy headway of it up the grade. Then suddenly the red lantern was swung across the track and Skipp heard

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the engine's whistle toot twice in acknowledgment.

The heavy limited, its coach windows gleaming, drew up until the engine reached a point close to where the red lantern had been swung. Then all at once the puffing ceased and the train stopped.

Bill Skipp left the protection of his big boulder and climbed part way up to the tracks where the train stood. When he had come to a place which he considered near enough and whence he would have a good view of the proceedings, he paused.

There was a slight commotion around the locomotive. He heard some one speak, strong and quick. Then a door of one of the rear coaches opened and some one with a lantern stepped out. A shot rang out and a bullet zipped along the train.

"Get back in there, you blasted fool," came the command from somewhere near the express car door.

Another shot cracked.

"Hustle up, I say."

The trainman with his lantern hustled. He popped back into the coach. The door slammed shut. There was a pounding at the express-car door.

"Open up in there," was the order. "Open up before I touch off this dynamite and blow you all to ——!"

The threat was effective. The express-car door swiftly slid open. Instantly a man swung up into the car. For a second he was visible in the square of light made by the open door. A pistol dangled in his fingers. Then he disappeared inside the car.

"I expect I've seen about enough," said the attentive Bill. "He'll likely get what he wants in there. After that they'll not be long. I'd better get to work."

It was not more than five minutes later that the two bandits came crashing down the hillside. They crossed the stream and hastened toward the screened spot where they had left their horses. On the D. & I. tracks above, Number Eleven's whistle was roaring angrily as if the train was in great haste to quit the scene of its discomforture.

As the two bandits came under the trees that concealed their mounts a light, unexpected and dazzling, flashed into their faces. From behind the light came a voice, strong and confident.

"Stick up your hands. Do it quick. This is why."

The barrel of a pistol gleamed in the flash-light's glare.

The bandits, surprized and momentarily bewildered, put up their hands. As they did so, a square bundle, strongly sealed, fell at the feet of the man who was slightly in the lead—the tall, slender man.

"My, but you're nervous," chided Bill Skipp gently. "There goes the boodle. Whoa! Never mind, I'll get it. This is a darned funny gun I got here—goes off awful unlooked-for sometimes. Now move a little farther apart, you two; about five or six feet. That's good; stand still."

Bill stepped forward. Warily and deftly he frisked the pistol from the slender man's belt. He moved aside, his light playing on both of the men, and did likewise to the heavy-set man. The two weapons he deposited in his pockets.

"That's better," he said, stepping back and moving over to where the bundle lay on the ground.

Quickly he stooped and picked it up.

"The sixty thousand. I expect. Seems too bad, but I'm afraid you boys'll never get your share. No; or that dispatcher either."

An oath, deep and bitter, escaped the heavy-set man. It was the first sound he had made.

"Curse his hide! What'd I tell you?" He glowered at his companion.

"Oh, shut up!" growled the latter. "What's that got to do with it?"

"He got us into this thing!" The chunky man ripped out a string of strong words.

"That's just the way I feel about him," soothed Bill. "Still, that'll do for the present. Be quiet."

He addressed the other man.

"You've just the two horses, I suppose? Not another one sticking around somewhere, have you?"

The man did not answer immediately. Probably this was partly due to the fact that Number Eleven at the moment was pulling out. Quite possibly he had believed that his captor was a railroad officer and was wondering why Skipp had made no effort to let the trainmen know that the robbers of the express car had been rounded up.

"No," he answered shortly after a moment as Number Eleven rolled ahead.

"Too bad," said Bill. "That means you fellows'll have to take turns walking then; over the roughest places anyway. Maybe the one horse'll carry double when we hit a smooth trail. Here, Fat, you climb up on that bay. Slim, you can take the first trick on foot. Myself, I'll ride this black one."

The heavier man mounted the bay horse as directed. Bill swung into the saddle of the black horse.

"You go first, Fat. You next, Slim; then me. Don't act funny, do just as I say, and don't forget that I've got all the guns. Remember too that even without this flash-light I can see to shoot; it's not that dark."

Bill tightened the reins of his mount.

"Eight miles to Rock Junction. That's where we're going. We ought to hit a trail

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somewhere down this valley. If we don't we'll sort of follow the D. & I.; that'll bring us in. All ready? Then let's move. Giddap!"

They started down the valley. But as they went Skipp for all his blitheness was a little troubled. As soon as Number Eleven would reach Rock Junction the report of the hold-up would be made, an alarm raised.

That meant posses would be coming. And posses just now were something he wished to avoid; he wasn't ready as yet to give up his prisoners.

THE lights of Rock Junction popped into view as Skipp and his two captives rounded a bend in the hills. The trail being good here the pair were mounted together on the one horse. They were riding without the aid of the little pocket lamp, for the luminous sky furnished all the light necessary.

"There she is," said Bill with pleasure. So far they had encountered no one.

But he had no more than spoken when he heard the sound of hoof-beats pounding up the trail, and not very distant. He looked about. There was absolutely no place of concealment near.

Then all at once it struck him that there seemed to be but one oncoming horse. He listened. The surmise apparently was correct.

"Only one man," said Bill to himself. "I'll take a chance on handling him."

A horseman suddenly loomed up out of the gloom. He drew rein sharply as he perceived the men waiting just ahead.

"Whoa!" he cried. "What's all this?"

"Travelers, bound for Rock Junction," answered Skipp promptly.

The lone horseman drew nearer.

"Travelers, eh?" he said.

His voice was suspicious. But before he could say more Skipp's flash-light dazzled his eyes.

"Hands up!" said Bill, holding his pistol so that it could be seen in the gleam. "Stay right there and tell us who you are."

An ejaculation came from this latest victim of Skipp's craft as he raised his hands. But he appeared not at all nonplused.

"I'll bet you're the fellows," he said coolly.

"Just two of us," returned Bill with equal coolness. "But you haven't said who you are."

"I'm the Rock Junction marshal," came the answer. There was the hint of a warning in the words.

"But where's your posse?" asked Skipp.

"Posse!" The man snorted. "What do I want with a posse? They said there were only two in the job."

Bill laughed suddenly. He was pleased with this marshal—with his self-possession, his assurance, his strong face. Abruptly he decided it might be a good stroke to take him into his confidence.

"Listen!" said Bill. "I've a few words for your ear." He urged his horse close to the marshal's steed. "Will you hear them?"

"Sure," said the marshal. "Shoot ahead."

For several minutes Skipp talked, low and earnestly, the marshal at different times nodding or interrupting with questions. The result obviously was mutually satisfactory, for the two shook hands in perfect good-fellowship.

"Son, that's a pretty nifty scheme," said the marshal then. "I'm anxious to see how it works. We'll just do it."

"It's mighty good of you to agree," said Bill.

"Pshaw! Forget it," protested the marshal. "Let's go; I'm ready if you are."

"We are," said Bill. He spoke to the two silent bandits. "Get along, boys."

They started down the trail again.

IT WAS something past two o'clock the next afternoon, Saturday, when Number Ninety-Eight, an accommodation from Rock Junction and intermediate points, pulled into the terminal at Lamont.

Among the passengers who alighted were four men who kept in close contact with one another and who, as they walked through the train-shed toward the main depot building, paired off, each man on the right clutching his companion's nearer arm with his left hand, while his right hand nestled with a certain tense alertness in the right-hand pocket of his coat.

The pairs were respectively Bill Skipp and Slim; Curt Lands, Rock Junction marshal, and Fat. Under his right arm, squeezed against his side, Skipp carried a small bundle loosely wrapped in common brown parcel paper.

Here and there about the gates of the train-shed stood certain men, watching the passengers streaming through.

"Look at those pop-eyed bulls!" chuckled Bill, pressing Slim's arm as they passed several of the watching men. "All looking for suspicious strangers who might know something about the hold-up of Number Eleven."

Arrived in the depot, they passed through the big waiting-room, proceeding without delay to the stairway. Up the steps they went, not pausing until they had reached the third-floor office of Division Operator Massey.

Without hesitation Skipp turned the latch and looked inside. Massey, he was pleased to note, sat alone in the office.

"Come in, boys," said Skipp and stepped inside the room. The others did the same. Bill closed the door.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Massey," said he pleasantly. "Has Mr. Ellett cracked yet?"

The division operator had been gaping in

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surprize at the group—particularly at his late operator. His astonishment was written all over his countenance.

"Skipp!" he exclaimed. His eyes ran over the others. "What is the meaning of this?"

"This," returned Skipp evenly, "is a little delegation come to see you upon certain important business. I'll introduce us; Mr. Lands, Mr. Slim, Mr. Fat, meet Mr. Massey, the division operator."

Skipp maintained a poise of perfect gravity as he rattled off the impromptu names of the two who had come with himself and the marshal, and this in view of the division operator's open perplexity clearly made it difficult for Lands to keep a straight face.

"I don't quite understand—" began Massey uncertainly after an exchange of short nods.

"We'll make it all clear directly," promised Bill with an expressive gesture. "You'll see."

He repeated the question he had put upon entering.

"Has Mr. Ellett cracked yet?"

That was almost too much for the division operator.

"What foolishness is this?" he said vehemently, frowning.

"Foolishness?" repeated Bill soberly. "None whatever, I guarantee you. Ask any of these men." He waved his hand at the others.

"Very serious business this," affirmed Lands briefly. He wagged his head. "Most serious." He repeated Skipp's expression. "You'll see."

"Exactly," continued Skipp. "You'll remember I predicted yesterday that Mr. Ellett would give way under the strain. I warned you. Very well. If he hasn't cracked yet he will—today. You'll see."

The division operator exploded.

"Heavens and earth!" he cried. "What are you trying to pull off here?"

"You'll—you'll find out," said Bill. He glanced at Lands in a way that again threatened the marshal's composure.

"Heard you had a hold-up last night," went on Bill, looking at the division operator and apparently switching the talk from the business at hand. "Anything in it?"

Massey glared at him. "What if there was?" he grunted.

"Get much?" inquired the imperturbable Bill.

"How in the —— would I know?" answered Massey sourly.

"I'm sure I couldn't say," said Bill. "But I think you would. Don't s'pose they've got the robbers yet?"

Massey's reply was like a growl.

"Guess not."

"Hard lines," condoled Skipp. "Well, let's talk about something else."

He glanced at the clock on the wall; it showed two-thirty.

"Wonder if Ellett might be around here somewhere."

Ellett began his trick at 3 P. M. Bill was aware of that.

By this time Massey's speech had been reduced to a mere series of grumpy replies.

"Don't know," he said.

"Believe I'll look," averred Skipp. "Want to see him, you know—most special."

He looked away from the division operator and turned to the three who had entered with him.

"Gentlemen, be seated," he said.

He indicated some chairs lined up along the wall on one side of the room.

"Reckon we might as well," said Lands.

He pointed to the two chairs which were farthest from the door.

"Take those two, gents."

Slim and Fat, who since entering had said never a word, took the two seats. Their faces were glum, their manner dejected. Lands himself sat down on the chair nearest the door, sitting partly sidewise in a position that enabled him to keep a close scrutiny of the pair.

Skipp placed the package he had been carrying on the marshal's lap.

"Keep this while I'm out," he said.

He moved to the door.

"Be good, boys." He smiled. "I shouldn't be long."

From the division operator's office Skipp walked down the hallway in the direction of the stairs. Ellett, he figured, would this day more than likely arrive early for duty. The dispatcher, calculated Bill, would be anxious to be where he could have an eye on developments concerning Number Eleven's hold-up, and that place, of course, would be the headquarters of the D. & I.

Therefore Bill loitered near the head of the stairway, knowing that the dispatcher's office was on the same floor as Massey's office. He kept close watch of those who came and went.

He had been there but a few minutes when he suddenly perceived Ellett stepping swiftly up the stairs. The dispatcher was in a hurry, there was no doubt of that. Quickly Skipp slipped into a doorway, waited until he had seen Ellett pass along the corridor toward the dispatcher's office, then followed.

Skipp beheld Ellett reach the dispatcher's room, open the door and go in. Bill, when he came to the door, also opened it and stepped into the office.

Within were five or six coatless men—first-trick dispatchers and copy operators. And over in one corner was Ellett, drawing a glass of water from a filter which stood there. His back was turned to Skipp.

Bill raised his voice.

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"WHAT'S the latest on Number Eleven's hold-up?"

He almost shouted the words, his voice strong and vigorous. He addressed no one in particular, although the supposition might well have been that he had.

First-trick dispatchers and copy operators whirled about on the person who had thus rudely made his presence known, regarding him as if he were some kind of lunatic. But Bill paid no heed to them whatever. His eyes were fixed on Ellett.

There was a crash. Ellett had dropped his glass. He had turned and his gaze was fastened on Skipp as if he perceived a ghost; his sharp face was white, his eyes wide and staring.

For only a second did Skipp return Ellett's stare. Then he spoke again.

"Do you know if there's anything in the report that they've caught the two fellows who did it and that the robbers have confessed everything? I heard there was a railroad man mixed up in it."

His voice was loud as before and again he spoke to the gathering in general.

The words spoken, Bill's gaze went back to Ellett. The dispatcher's face was the face of one in a panic of fear. One hand rested against the wall as if for support. No one but Skipp, however, appeared to notice Ellett's condition.

For a moment there had been silence following Bill's last words. Then one of the first-trick dispatchers broke the spell.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Skipp retreated to the door. He pulled it open.

"Ask Ellett!" he said, and glided out.

Once more he loitered near the stairway. But he didn't wait long. Not a half-moment had passed when the door of the dispatcher's room opened and Ellett stumbled out, his manner like that of one endeavoring to escape some pursuing evil spirit.

The dispatcher fairly ran down the corridor, heedless of all about him. He reached the stairs.

"Where to, Ellett?" said a voice. "What's your hurry?"

The dispatcher, cringing, looked up at Bill Skipp with eyes of fear.

"Skipp!" he faltered, falling back a step. "Skipp!" He licked his dry lips. "Step aside. I'm ill; I must get out."

"Mr. Massey wants to see you," said Bill, never budging. "In his office."

"Not now." Ellett's voice had become a pleading whisper. "I'll be back in a few minutes. I can't go now."

"You'll come," said Bill shortly.

His big hand clutched Ellett's arm. He started toward Massey's office, dragging the dispatcher along with him.

"Don't," entreated Ellett like a whimpering schoolboy. "I'm ill, I tell you! Let go!"

"Stow it," said the unrelenting Skipp.

He came to the door of Massey's office and threw it open.

"In with you," he said, and shoved the dispatcher inside the room.

The manner and the noise of their entrance had brought all within the office to their feet; Massey at his desk, Lands, Slim and Fat beside the chairs along the wall.

"Observe!" said Bill to Massey. "Look at this gentlemen and tell me if he hasn't cracked!"

He held Ellett up for inspection much as one might have exhibited some inanimate piece of merchandise. Ellett certainly needed holding up; his knees were sagging beneath him.

The dispatcher upon entering had looked first at Massey. But as his frightened eyes had fallen upon the two men whom Lands had been guarding, consciousness of the division operator's presence seemed momentarily to leave him. His face went from white to gray, his wide eyes filled with supreme terror and dread.

Massey's voice broke in.

"Ellett, what's the trouble?" He faced Skipp. "I demand to know what this means!"

"No need to demand it," replied Bill. "We'll be very pleased to explain." He turned to Slim and Fat. "Do you recognize this man; do you know him?" he asked.

It was Fat who spoke first. His tongue, ever ready for that sort of thing, gave play to a stream of scorching oaths.

"Sure we know him! He's the dashed fool who talked us into this thing!"

"And how about you, Slim?" questioned Skipp.

Slim was silent for a little bit. But as he had been regarding Ellett his gaze had slowly turned from feigned indifference to open contempt.

"If he was a man," said Slim with sudden scorn, "I might have denied it. But look at the sniveling little rat!" He snorted his disdain. "It's as my pardner says; Ellett's the man who engineered the job."

"The job!" exclaimed Massey, plainly as yet quite unsuspecting anything of the truth. His perplexity, indeed, seemed but to be increasing. "What job?"

Skipp looked at Lands.

"Show him that bundle," he directed.

The marshal stepped forward, tore the covering of brown paper from the parcel he had been holding, and tossed it on to Massey's desk. It now was revealed as a square, compact package, wrapped in strong, white paper, securely bound, sealed with many daubs of red wax. The package fell directly under Massey's nose, face up. The division operator stared down at it.

"Sixty thousand dollars," he said aloud,

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reading from what was written upon the parcel. "Sixty thousand dollars!" he repeated slowly.

And then the full significance of it all seemed suddenly to come upon him. He looked up, his face incredulous.

"The sixty thousand—from Number Eleven!" he gasped. "You don't mean it—it can't be!"

"We do mean it, and it can be," asserted Bill tranquilly.

"But who did it? How did the money get here?" The questions tumbled from Massey's lips.

"Mr. Slim and Mr. Fat did it," replied Bill. "Then they got caught and we brought them and it here."

Massey looked at the two bandits. It was considerable of a shock for him to find that the two men who had held up Number Eleven were in his office. Out in the hills scores of men were scouring the country for the two men who stood before him.

In every city and town within a radius of a hundred miles officers of the law were watching for them. The wires were hot with reports and instructions.

And yet here, in the very center of the hustle and activity, in his office, their entrance unheralded, had come the perpetrators of the deed which had set the D. & I. by the ears. Here in his office all mystery surrounding the affair was being cleared up, the course of the drama was being unfolded before him. Small wonder Massey was amazed.

"These two men!" he ejaculated. "But who—who captured them?"

"There's nothing to do but confess," said Bill. "I did it."

"You!" cried Massey. "You! Alone?"

"I and my little gun and my flash-light," replied Skipp. "That's all."

The division operator gulped.

"Skipp!" he said. "You're not trying to fool me, are you?"

"Indeed, no!" cut in Marshal Lands as he shook his finger at Massey. "Don't you think anything like that. He did what he says. As for me, I only helped guard these fellows after he brought 'em in."

Massey passed his hand over his forehead in a helpless sort of gesture. That he was convinced there was not a shadow of doubt.

"I still don't see," he said, "just how Mr. Ellett has been dragged into this." His tone betokened that the limit in surprizes had been reached; any further revelations would not astound him.

"Mr. Ellett was to get one-third—twenty thousand dollars," said Skipp. "He knew somehow that the money would be on the train. As Slim says, he engineered the job. These men were to do the actual robbing, but Ellett was to get his share."

He looked down at the unhappy dispatcher. "Tough fortune, Ellett. You never will."

SOMETHING like a groan escaped Ellett. It seemed to be echoed by Massey. Here truly was a rending, a slashing of the calm superiority, the smooth, smug complacency which habitually enveloped those who directed the affairs of the D. & I. A scandal, soon to be promiscuously displayed to the public view.

"My ——, Ellett! Why did you do it?" moaned Massey.

But Ellett answered nothing. His eyes dropped before the entreating, accusing gaze of the division operator. His wabbly knees gave way entirely. He sagged toward the floor, Skipp's strong clasp being the only thing that kept him from falling altogether.

"Here," said Bill. "This won't do."

He put his hands beneath Ellett's arms, literally lifted the dispatcher and deposited him on a chair. He dusted his hands involuntarily as if to rid himself of something unpleasant.

"The thing is done," he said then, facing Massey. "I feel like a prophet." He flirted a finger at Ellett. "He's cracked—completely!"

He stood silent a moment, surveying the morose Massey and the crushed Ellett. His departure from the D. & I. after all was not to be the sordid, humiliating affair he had pictured it two days since—on Thursday. The paternally patronizing atmosphere, the studied condescension which emanated from this place had, so far as he was concerned, been forever dissipated. He had smashed it into unrecognizable fragments.

He was filled with a controlled elation which came chiefly from the circumstance that he now felt free to depart, secure in the knowledge that he had vindicated himself, in his stated estimate of Ellett's character at least.

That Ellett's charge of neglect of duty had not been absolutely cleared was a small thing and bothered him not at all. The proof of the dispatcher's perfidy would automatically discount any charge which Ellett might have made. Bill Skipp turned to Lands.

"Marshal," he said, "I'll leave the rest to you. You can deliver up Slim and Fat as you think best. I'm done, and I'm going."

He faced about swiftly and started for the door. As he reached it Massey's voice stopped him.

"Skipp!" cried Massey, seemingly abruptly awakened to his former operator's intention and to a realization of the fact that his own part had not been of the sweetest; that it was up to him to make some amends. "Don't go, Skipp! I think we can adjust our—our unfortunate affair of the other day."

"It's been adjusted," said Bill.

"But you can't go like this!" protested

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Massey. "I'll admit that our—that my judgment was at fault. I'm convinced your contentions were correct."

"I'm obliged," responded Bill. His hand reached for the knob. "That fixes everything just right." He smiled contentedly. "But I'm leaving just the same." He turned the latch.

"But why?" cried Massey. "Why won't you stay?"

From the open doorway Bill Skipp looked back at the division operator. He felt like smiling at the denseness which believed it could kick and stamp a man's self-respect into the dirt and then atone for it with a few smooth words, with the proffered bribe of something of material value. But he didn't smile; he merely contemplated Massey gravely for the space of a second.

"Ah, that!" said Bill quietly. "Now that is something you'd never understand."

The door closed behind him.

Author of "The Harpooner," etc.

YOU'RE a husky tough and a —— liar, Thorpe. So I don't want to spoil a good mind for you, though I'm losing a darn good sailor; I'll give you that. If you want to stay here for six months I suppose you'll do as well as anybody else; but I'll be —— if I order another man to stop with you. That'll have to be a volunteer, and I don't know of any man in the ship who's fool enough to want to play *Friday* to your *Crusoe*."

In such manner did blunt Jed Roantree, skipper of the shark-fisherman *Pilot Fish*, receive the offer of Sam Thorpe to remain ashore on the tiny volcanic island of Kalhara for the regular period of half a year to gather sharkhides for shagreen.

Sam stood loutishly before the skipper, his tremendous arms dangling awkwardly, his strong, stubborn face bent forward menacingly. His aspect was habitual, and even had it been possible to scare him his face would never show it. He knew well enough that every hard word he heard was merited.

He was both a liar and a bully, a physical terror to his mates and a moral contagion. But nothing had ever happened in his life to show him that truth beat lying; and no man had yet succeeded in proving on his face or steel-strung body the futility of mere brute strength.

One merit he undoubtedly possessed: Sam was as full of courage as he was of wickedness. There had been times when men wondered if they had not been mistaken in him; if such sterling grit could possibly exist along with a mean soul. Their wonder lasted just as long as Sam's soft mood lasted when he went overboard one day with a turn of rope around his wrist to save young Perry in a sweeping hurricane sea. The rope cut deeply into his wrist; and the moment he landed Perry on deck, and his mates began to mutter commendatory words around him, Sam glared redly at the man he had saved, stepped forward, and beat him for causing him to cut his wrist.

That had brought swift notice from aft, and the plucky brute was hailed before the skipper.

"You've got to stop this business, Thorpe," old Jed Roantree had said, angrily. "You go and save a chap's life, and almost lose an arm doin' it, then sail in and hammer seven bells out o' the lad."

"He stole me skinnin' knife. I hammered him fer that," Sam retorted, and whipped out a

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long, keen, pointed fisherman's knife on the handle of which was scratched the letters: C. PERR.

"There y'are," he snarled, with a finger like a rheumatic sausage tracing the unfinished name. "Ask him yerself if this is my knife. Then ask yerself what name this'd be if 't was finished."

Perry had conceded Sam the knife's ownership, and was forced to admit that no other man in the ship had a name which contained those letters in such order; but he stoutly denied all knowledge concerning the origin of the letters; angrily denied the theft and expressed the opinion that Sam Thorpe had scratched that imperfect name himself in order to trump up a reason for his brutal assault.

But Charley Perry was the direct opposite to Thorpe in everything except courage. Weak, where Sam was powerful, clean of heart where Sam was murky, loving truth where the other preferred the more picturesque lie, he knew gratitude where Sam only knew contempt for the man he had snatched out of the maw of the sea. So, in spite of his momentary anger when he heard Sam's vicious charge, he nursed in his heart the deepest admiration for his accuser, while fully aware that the gap between them could never be bridged.

These things considered, there was a mild sensation in the old schooner when Sam Thorpe volunteered to relieve the men left on Kalhara in the Celebes Sea, six months before. The job was not a savory one, nor easy; it meant a half-year of strenuous chase after the tiger of the sea, six months of messy skinning of sharks and noisome tanning of hides, a dreary spell of life made up of hard work at sea, harder work ashore, indifferent food and natives for company.

Perhaps, right at bottom, this last condition had much to do with Thorpe's decision for he anticipated having little in common with any man who elected to stay with him and the morals of the brown community were notoriously easy since whalers placed the island on the chart as a watering-place.

Therefore the sensation following his decision was mild. It was much more marked when Perry went aft and volunteered to be the second man to stay behind.

"I ain't telling you to stay with that man," the skipper warned him. "D'ye know what you're biting off, Perry?"

"Sure I know, cap'n," Perry replied unconcernedly. "Sam ain't dangerous. He's only spoiled. Anyway, I ain't scared of him. Maybe I'll tame him before he kills me."

"Better keep a spare skinnin' knife, and keep it sharp," grinned the mate with a wink.

"What for? '

"Well, anyhow," put in the skipper, cutting short the mate's little pleasantry, "you'd better keep your eyes wide open. You may not need an extra knife, Perry, but you need all your wits. You can handle most any kind o' critter in life, but you never can tell with a liar. You can back down now if you like. If you're set to stay, then good luck. That's all."

WHEN the two men deposited their belongings on the floor of the little hut they were to occupy jointly, and started to stow their stores away, Sam kept his dark gaze fixed upon his companion. His first dull rage at having such a weakling paired with him gradually gave way to a gloomy satisfaction in the knowledge that he could give rein to his bullying instincts unchecked for six long months.

Knowing that Perry had volunteered, he wondered why; but the wonder only lasted for a brief space; his first loud-spoken intimation that Perry was to assume the job of cook and housekeeper met with ready acquiescence on the little fellow's part, and so, thus early, their respective shares in the dual duty were established.

Certainly their job had nothing of romance in it, for all the gorgeous setting. Kalhara was a simple volcanic cone, sheer from sea-bed to clouds except on the side where the tiny village nestled. There the shore sloped from a bottle-shaped bay of which the neck was the entrance. Jungle and trees clad the cone to the summit, leaving only the barest of bare rims against the sky to betray the character of the mountain. On two sides, that behind the village and the side farthest opposite, a comparatively narrow tract of rugged lava formed a seam in the mantle of greenery reaching to a point a hundred feet below the summit on the village side, and clear to the crater rim on the other. These tracts were pointed out to the newcomers by the natives as the paths of the mountain spirits. The only other white man on Kalhara, Carter, the trader, told them the truth of those old lava streams, long since cooled off into solid rock.

"No fear of trouble with the old mountain now," he said. "Used to be a rotten old beast. Don't know how many times all hands have been wiped out in the past. Safe now, though."

It was at the foot of the lava stream that their shark hide-huts were built. In through the bottle-neck entrance the great sharks flocked every tide, carefully baited month after month, year after year, with the bodies and entrails of their fellows whose skins were drying in the huts. There was never a fear that all would be caught, leaving none to carry the news of the feast to other sharks outside.

The little bay swarmed like a pot of eels for three hours every day, and with all the hands available not more than a dozen big fellows could be caught, for the business demanded that only the fish in the best condition be taken, and they needed to be selected. The

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catch of one day occupied both fishermen all the next day in skinning and pegging out, and preparing the bait for the next catch.

Very soon after their arrival, Sam Thorpe became intimate with Carter, and the reason was quickly manifested. Carter kept a stock of liquor, and was moreover a bully in his relations with the natives. It was inevitable that two such kindred souls should drift together. And once Perry went with Sam to the trader's bungalow to feast upon canned luxuries; but Perry cared nothing for liquor, and something occurred there which decided him to stay away in future.

Waiting upon them at supper, and later at the drinking, was a small wisp of a native girl, a child of ten years or so. Nimble and handy as the most exacting of masters could require, little Jemima, as Carter had named her, earned nothing but hard looks and curses from the trader; and as the evening progressed, and bottles were emptied, the child's large dark eyes grew terrified, as if from long experience she expected worse than curses to speedily materialize. She watched Perry furtively, noticing that he alone drank nothing, and he sensed the fear she felt.

It was not long in coming, that something she feared. In getting an empty bottle off the table Jemima leaned against Carter's arm, causing him, drunk as he was becoming, to slop some of his liquor. With a savage oath he flung the rest of the liquor in his glass into the child's eyes, and with a sweep of his hand sent her staggering across the floor to fall into the lap of Sam Thorpe.

"Give her a boost back here," laughed Carter, wickedly, and Sam took up the game with glee, for it had been some time since he had indulged his propensities for causing pain. He grabbed the girl by the arms, drew her in his chest, and thrust her with all the might of his great arms backward into the trader's grip again.

Carter seized her tightly, and raised his clenched hand over her. Before the blow could fall, he pitched headlong to the floor under the smashing impact of a bottle on his head, and Perry stood over him, one arm about the child, another bottle in the other hand ready to repeat the dose.

Sam chuckled amusedly, leering up from his chair at his suddenly awakened mate, the mate who never drank, who never lied, who in fact did nothing that real men do. But Carter lay still. Sam's dull drunkenness passed into a sudden access of alarm.

He knelt down and examined the unconscious man; his hands came away covered with blood, and the shock sobered him at once. With crude skill he went to work to bathe and bandage the man's head; and when he had finished he stumbled off home to his own hut, dimly aware that Perry had gone without bothering to find out whether he had killed a man or not.

Slipping into his bunk in the dark, it was morning before he saw what Perry had done. Jemima shyly set out food for them, dividing her attention, apparently, between her rescuer's needs and that other hut, visible along the beach, from which dire punishment must surely come soon; for how could that small white man, so slim and pale, who drank none of the strong man's drink, nor cursed with every other breath, how could he protect her from her master. Even Sam Thorpe's bleary eyes stared at her with threat, and he was big enough to eat her champion.

"What ye going to do with her?" demanded Sam, his hunger satisfied, his curiosity aroused. "Carter'll be down after her soon's he can stand."

"He can't have her," replied Perry quietly. "She stays here with me, and if you don't like it you can build yourself another shack, Sam."

A wicked light came into Sam's clouded eyes, and the stale fumes of last night's alcoholic surfeit formed foul ghosts in his hot brain.

"It's a brave little man, so it is," he drawled. "It can kill a man settin' down, with a bottle, and it can steal a girl as ain't old enough to leave her Mammy. Say, Perry," he snarled with sudden ferocity, "you're a —— cradle robber, you are!"

Stumbling to his feet Sam clutched the child's arm and dragged her to him.

"I'm takin' her back home," he announced. Jemima uttered a smothered little cry, and her great black eyes entreated Perry with piteous faith. There was a sudden flash of steel, the child staggered back, and Perry crouched before his mate, a dripping skinning knife in his hand. Blood dripped from Sam's fingers; his shirt was red from shoulder to wrist; in his wide eyes was a new look of fearful astonishment as he glared at Perry.

"She stays with me, Sam," reiterated Perry very quietly. "You take your things out o' here, see."

ALONG the beach Carter could be heard bawling in hoarse tones for Jemima. He appeared at the door of his hut shortly, a bottle in his hand, shading his eyes with the other hand and gazing toward the shark-fishermen's huts. Urging the child outside, Perry started her for the mountain, telling her to hide until he returned home; then, taking no notice either of Sam or Carter, he went about his daily work whistling.

He saw the two men join, and start back to Carter's place after a short exchange of grumbling talk; and Sam remained away until late afternoon, when the skins were all pegged out and the dried hides from the previous catch

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folded and stacked. Then, when Perry was about to call back the child, Sam blustered in, primed with rum, boiling over with fight.

"Come here, y' shrimp!" he roared, and reached out a claw-like hand.

Perry knocked it aside, and Sam staggered blindly.

"I'm goin' to pull you to bits an' see what makes y' tick," stated Sam, with an absurd relapse to quiet intensity of purpose. He swung a terrific punch, which Perry barely ducked under in time, and the wasted effort sent him crashing over into a corner from which he slowly picked himself up, blinking.

"No knife tricks, now, Perry," he said, with ridiculous gravity. "Fair fightin', an' no bloomin' Dago doin's, that's me, Perry boy. C'm 'ere."

"I can handle you without a knife, or take a licking," returned Perry, seeing no fun in the situation.

Sam made a stumbling rush, and swung both fists together. One Perry dodged, the other landed on his cheek and hurled him out through the door. Sam was after him with all the cunning of the habitual scrapper; woozy as he was he retained all his fighting wits.

"Don't use knives, hey?" he snarled. "Then what's my —— shoulder all bound up for, hey?"

His tremendous swings had reminded him sharply of that wounded shoulder; the bandage was displaced, and his shirt was reddening again. He attacked afresh, furious now with pain as well as memories.

"I knifed you for the kid, Sam," panted Perry, growing cooler as he found some of Sam's blows avoidable. "I don't use steel to fight for me. Why don't you quit now. You'll damage that shoulder bad, Sam."

Sam replied by closing Perry's right eye with a fierce left hand punch, and rapidly blundered in closer. Perry took a swing for himself, stepping aside as he delivered it, and to his amazement he connected solidly to Sam's ear, and the big man shot sideways with a crash. A stone, against which he struck his head, finished what the punch began, and Sam Thorpe was counted out.

For a moment Perry stared down at the fallen tough, unable to credit his senses; then realisation came, and with it a surge of pride in his new-found powers. He called Jemima, and the child, who had lurked nearby all through the fight, ran to him with worship in her eyes for this little white man who had, in the space of less than one short day, broken the head of her first master, Carter, knifed a second assailant, and ended by thrashing him in the strange white man's fashion without weapons.

Together they dragged Sam inside and laid him on a bunk. Then with clean linen and cool water Perry dressed Sam's wounded shoulder afresh, bathed and salved the broken bruise on his forehead, and left him for sleep to complete the cure.

One of Perry's hardships on the island, as it had been at sea, was the scarcity of reading-matter, for the lad was a student in his crude way. Since arriving at Kalhara, he had cast inquiring eyes toward the mountain summit, but had never been up there, chiefly because the natives refused to go there for fear of the spirits who lived in the crater, and he had never been able to secure a companion for the climb.

Sam only laughed at such foolishness. Why should a man climb mountains like a goat when he could keep on the level, or easier yet take a boat and make another pull for him. But now there was the child, Jemima, and when he looked at her with a whimsical sort of question in his glance he saw blind devotion in the small face.

"Will you come up there with me?" he asked, pointing to the summit. "I want to see what's in that big black hole."

The big black hole was the source of the lava tract which ran down behind the village, and it opened into the mountain a hundred feet below the ragged fringe of the crater. It was the reputed abode of all the most turbulent devils of the Islanders' hell. Jemima shivered, and her big black eyes widened. But she answered quickly enough:

"I go, Pelly, longa you, sure."

THEY took food and a gourd of water, and clambered to the big black hole, Perry chattering animatedly, Jemima in awed silence.

"D'you know why I wanted you to come with me?" Perry smiled as they entered the gloomy, sulfurous cavern hand in hand.

"I think for 'fraid of Sam."

"Not quite, kiddie. I'm scared Carter might come down and get you if I left you. You don't want to go back to him, hey?"

In the darkness he could feel the child shudder again.

"No want, Pelly, but s'pose must go sometime. Misser Ca'ter buy me from my faller fo' rum, long time."

Perry gripped the slender wrist reassuringly, determined more than ever that the child should never leave him unwillingly while he lived. He would see Carter, and if necessary buy the child from him; if necessary, kill him in her defense. In another moment they emerged into a wide, light aperture, before which the sunlight shimmered and danced through a gray and gold mist of smoke and sulfur fumes. Jemima hung back; but wild horses could not have held Perry back when once he had looked into that vast cauldron.

"Gee, gosh!" he gasped. Kneeling down on the edge of the pit, he gazed across a seething

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lake of fire half a mile in width. The tossing, hissing sea of molten lava and fused metals, whose surface seemed to lie a hundred feet below the ledge on which he knelt, rose and fell with rhythmic motion like the tides, but with frequency more like the breathing of a giant.

Every five minutes or so the bubbling mass shot flames high aloft, and following them the whole contents of that devil's saucepan slowly rose, rose, seemed certain to overflow the crater rim, until it stopped at a blackened, cindered mark midway between the cavern and the normal surface.

A whimpering cry escaped the child, and a great gasp of relief burst from Perry as the boiling mass suddenly fell back from high level with a roar. Great bubbles formed on the top, which burst dully, sending out squirts of liquid fire and great puff balls of choking vapor which reached to and filled the cavern.

Though his eyes felt as if red-hot iron were boring into them, and his throat and mouth seemed coated with brimstone, Perry stayed fascinated while the hellish tide ebbed and flowed a half-dozen times. Then, reluctantly, he drew back and joined the child, whose fears had driven her out into the fresh air and sunlight of the mountainside.

They descended in silence. Jemima was silent through awe; Perry's was the silence of thought. Distant though it really was, that boiling tide in the crater had seemed fearfully close to him when at its highest flood. It required but the merest additional impulse from the bosom of Mother Earth to send that terrible destroyer out through the big black hole and into the little bay by way of the village. Only the age-old appearance of the lava tract down the slopes enabled him to believe at last that he had but seen what had in reality been going on without change for numberless years, and that the fact of his gazing into the abyss in no way increased the present danger of another catacylsm.

"The old mountain don't spit fire now, hey Jemima?" he smiled, patting the child's head encouragingly.

"Not for, oh, one t'ousan' year, I t'ink. Long time."

"Suppose it happened now?"

"All mans he run fast over bay," she said, pointing to the two horns of the little harbor.

"And suppose he too slow? Suppose he not know in time?"

"He die." Then, swiftly throwing aside the unwonted solemnity which had fallen upon her, Jemima laughed up in his face and added: "But no fear, Pelly. Dem spirits make planty trouble wid demselves alone up dere. Only bad fella can make spirit angry. You no bad fella, Pelly. Spirits no care fo' you go up dere today. Dey forget soon."

REACHING the shore, they found the hut and the fishing-grounds vacant. Jemima started to get food ready, while Perry went outside and sought for Sam. He was anxious about the man's wounded shoulder and bruised head. A roaring hail along the shore reached him, and he turned to see Sam Thorpe staggering toward him, waving a full bottle in each hand, his face red and alarmed in spite of his fresh spell of drunkenness.

"Hey, li'l man, go an' look at Carter, willya?" he roared. "He's loony, or somethin'. I can't do nothin' with him. T'rows th' furniture about like chips, he do, Perry, an' his eyes—Man!" Sam staggered forward and clutched Perry's shirt. His eyes were bleary but glinting with fear.

"He's drunk again, I suppose," retorted Perry angrily.

"Dunno what 'tis, chum. I wanted to help 'im to bed, an' he hit me with the water chatty an' called me a con-confounded blast—blast—Oh, blastoderm, or somethin'. He's bad, Perry, an' 'tain't booze, neither."

There was no mention or hint of the encounter of the morning, and Perry looked at Sam with suspicion. He was unwilling to leave Jemima alone with Sam in his condition. Sam must have caught something of the idea, for he laughed with drunken drollery and spluttered, staggering to keep his footing:

"Never min' 'bout li'l gal, Perry. Give y' best, I do. Y'r too —— hot f'r me, boy. Li'l gal's all ri' wit' me an' I won't touch her while yer gone. Bi'n'by, when me arm gits well, I'll knock th' bally oakum outa yuh f'r doin' that; tha's all."

Perry found the trader far gone in a sharp fever, induced primarily by alcohol, and precipitated and intensified by the broken head Perry had dealt him. Darkness had fallen and a threatened rain storm materialized, before the sick man was eased into a fitful sleep. His ravings were startling at first, blood-curdling in their educated blasphemy; revealing little bits of the man's past life which he doubtless would prefer left buried. But gradually, under Perry's care, he ceased his ravings and relaxed the tense muscular strain which had made him difficult to control.

Then the self-elected nurse bethought him of food and searched through Carter's stores, finding more liquid than solid rations. As he ate canned mutton and hardtack, listening to the hollow drumming of the rain and the creepy swish of wet palmettos in the wind, Sam's raucous voice carried down from their hut in boozy chorus, singing some old, better forgotten deep water chantey concerning the love affair of a Yankee bo'sun and his yaller gal under de coconut tree.

And almost as he remembered her existence, Jemima came in with a rush, dripping wet, her

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long black hair roped about her little face, carrying a cane basket of cooked fish and plantains.

"Oh," she cried, panting from her run, "let me stop longa you, Pelly. I frightened."

"Sam been botherin' you?" growled Perry, dragging her inside.

"No. He velly drunk, and no bodder but I 'fraid."

She stayed, and between them she and Perry dragged Carter back to life and sanity. Sam was not neglected for Jemima went down every day and cooked his food; and he never bothered the child, but went about his work in gloomy silence, never once going down to see about the trader's progress. Watch and watch Perry and the child nursed Carter, until his clear eyes and steady, though weak pulse, told of recovery. Then they returned to the other end of the beach, Perry visiting once or twice a day to see that the trader lacked nothing.

On the day when Carter came out of the hut for the first time since his sickness, Perry arrived just as he came through the door, and the two men's eyes met. The trader had a bunch of keys in his hand, and turned toward the door of his store shed, but as he stared at Perry with an unwavering gaze, he smiled faintly and said:

"Thanks for your trouble old chap. Return the favor some day, p'raps. Got some of my property down there, I believe?" pointing to Perry's hut.

"Yes, and she stays there," snapped Perry, suddenly furious.

"I was going to suggest it," Carter replied, still smiling wanly. "Decent little kid, Jemima is. Take her in payment for the time you've wasted over me. And here, wait a bit," he added, opening the store shed, "I've got some books of sorts here. Help yourself. You look like a reader."

PERRY'S sudden acquisition of a stock of reading-matter promised to hinder the shark fishing almost as much as Sam's rum drinking had; but once the elation cooled down the books took their rightful place as a recreative factor, and the fishing prospered the more for their influence. Sam said nothing when told where the books came from.

There was, also, unusual activity along the beach, and Carter's sheds began to fill with island produce. He was seen rarely during the day, scarcely oftener in the evenings, and never drunk now. Sam grew surly in his isolation, for he saw clearly that he was a being apart from all the rest; even the little brown people shunned him.

So long as his supply of rum lasted, however, he went about his daily work in a dull, heavy way, eternally growling to himself, eating when called, lending a hand to stretch a hide when necessary. But with the end of his last stolen bottle of rum he made his presence known once more. It came during a tremendous storm of tropical rain, which developed at dark into a thunder and lightning show which sent the natives scuttling for shelter in terror.

Sam was sitting in the hut, with Perry and the child, and he nursed his last peg of liquor while his mate told stories to soothe Jemima's fright. An appalling crash of thunder seemed to split the earth, and Sam gulped down his rum hastily. He had missed the lightning flash, sitting with hanging head; but the next flash lighted up the dark interior with a blaze of blinding radiance, and the whole island shook; the hut seemed to sway.

Then came the thunder, making the island vibrate again, and Sam stumbled to his feet, seized his empty bottle, and rushed away down to Carter for a fresh supply.

Perry looked anxiously into the child's scared face, but she appeared content in his arms. He breathed deeply with relief, for he had a strengthening suspicion regarding that queer shaking of the hut before the thunder crashed. He remembered that he was living on a volcano, and in one of the books Carter gave him he had been reading some of the old mountain's earlier vagaries. He set himself to getting the child to sleep; then he would climb up to the crater again and satisfy himself whether his suspicion was founded or not.

But Jemima was wakeful, and with all his stories, his tuneless songs, his whispered encouragement, it was an hour before he laid her in his own bunk and covered her face with a piece of tappa cloth to keep the lightning flashes out of her eyes. Then he stepped outside, glanced up at the sky, and went to don his oilskins before setting out on the gloomy climb. Carter entered, panting, at his heels.

"Gosh, Mister, what's stepped on your face?" exclaimed Perry, turning at the other's footstep. The trader's eyes were blackened and almost closed, his cheek was one big smear, and the high bridge of his nose was knocked sideways. Through the battered mask he grinned sheepishly.

"Thorpe told me a beastly tale about you and the girl. We fought. I called him a bally liar, Perry." Carter's eyes roved around the hut, and fastened upon the sleeping child, so carefully wrapped and covered up from harm.

"He is a liar; a —— bad liar!" cried Perry, hotly. "So you beat him up, hey?"

"Hardly," the trader grinned, crookedly. "I haven't recovered from that fever as thoroughly as I imagined. But I gave him an argument, Perry. If he'd been just a leetle drop drunker I think I would have licked him. You ought to have better luck."

"Who, me?"

"Yes. He said when he'd finished the bottle

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he's working on now, he's coming along to clean you up and make a good job of it. He broke into the store and got at the only case of booze I have left. I'm not drinking now, y'know. He'll be pie for you when he's lapped up a quart of that five star brandy on top of the rotten trade booze he's been lushing. Here, where are you off to?"

Perry was already outside the door again.

"You stay here and take care of her," he said, with a nod of the head toward the sleeping girl. "I'll be back before Sam gets here anyhow."

"Not funkin' him, are you?" drawled Carter, and there was a trace of a sneer in his tone which almost forced Perry to stop. But he had set his mind on satisfying himself regarding that earth tremor, and would not give up the idea.

"No, I ain't scared of him, Mr. Carter," he said. "I got to go up the hill but I shan't be long. You needn't stay if you want to go back home."

"Oh, I'm staying here," laughed the trader, shortly, and Perry started on his climb with a strange feeling of doubt that grew as he climbed. He could not decide about that farewell laugh of Carter's. It might be simply an expression of contempt for his apparent running away from Sam; or it might be . . .

"He's all right!" Perry told himself over and over. "He ain't going to play any tricks with the kid now, I don't believe."

But he quickened his pace, anxious to return as soon as possible. He reached the frowning hole in the mountain in the middle of a furious squall of rain and wind, and his entry was illumined with shivery effect by a stream of lightning that seemed to crackle. Fighting back his rising nervousness, he stumbled along the rocky passage and into the unearthly glow of the fiery crater.

HE SANK down on the ledge, appalled by the sheer grandeur of the scene. What had awed him in daylight might well paralyze his senses at that dark hour, when the leaping, hissing mass in the pit was reflected in the somber canopy overhead, and the lightning out of the heavens out-blazed the demoniacal fires from the bowels of the world.

But awe was banished, paralysis made impossible, by his first scrutiny of the lava level. Simultaneously with a roaring volley of thunder, the molten mass beneath him heaved and bubbled into a dome-like formation in the center of the crater, and when the bubble burst a pillar of fire leaped into the sky, a mass of red-hot solid matter as big as Captain Jed's ship was thrust up like the piston of some colossal cylinder, to fall crashing back with a deafening roar and cast a flood of liquid fire up the crater sides in a tide which seemed as if it could never cease rising.

Perry cringed back before that creeping sea of flame, and horror dwelt in his eyes. Drops of fiery spray licked in over his ledge and his heart stopped beating for a second. Then his breast almost burst with relief when the terrible tide ebbed and sank, but not, he noticed, to its former low level.

He strove to tear himself away from the awful, fascinating scene. It dragged him back like some sentient thing. Then, sharp as a voice in the desert, a drunken oath cracked on his ears, and a bottle smashed against the rock beside his head. He swung around and stepped aside as Sam Thorpe lurched into sight.

"Ho, here th' little chap is," roared Sam, reaching out a groping hand. "Run away, did y', hey? But I found y', hey? Oh!" He suddenly ceased his chattering, for his lurch carried him into full view of the seething cauldron below.

"My ——! Oh, my ——! Wha's that?"

"Ssh! I think there's dang ——"

"It ain't hell, is it, Perry?" stuttered Sam, fearfully.

"Looks like the crust of it, don't it? Watch."

Again the fiery tide surged upward, and now Sam crouched fascinated. Again that red-hot pillar of rock shot up until it was far above the level of the crater rim; and again it fell with the roar of a hundred thunders. Then the molten mass which covered it crept up the charred and scoriated sides until its heat scorched the eyeballs of the two rapt spectators in the black hole.

"Here, I'm goin' outa this!" Sam barked hoarsely, all his drunken unsteadiness banished. "That blazin' mess o' muck's comin' right in here!"

Perry gave him no answer, but seemed possessed of a demon of fierce energy. The bubbling stream of fire licked in over the ledge, and poured like a growing rivulet through the cavern, leaving a ghostly glow behind it until the outer air cooled it and stopped its run by hardening it into semisolid rock. Sam hopped aside as a tiny speck burned through his boot and blistered his foot; and in doing so he saw Perry, looming like a frantic imp against the red glare of the pit.

"Whatcher doin' bo?" yelled Sam. "Come on outa this oven o' hell!"

"Go yourself, if you're that yellow!" panted Perry. He leaped from side to side, tearing down huge pieces of loose rock, rolling them to the ledge and piling them in a barrier against the flaming stream. "Go down and give the alarm! You can do that.

"Get every man, woman and kid away from under this hole and over the bay. —— bustin' loose right now. Next time she rises she'll come through here two foot deep, unless she's stopped this way. Go ahead, y' poor yellow fish. Run away and tell the folks to clear out. This is a man's work!"

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Sam gave back curse for taunt, and his face was a-work with fury. But he joined Perry, and cursing the little man bitterly all the time, put his great strength forward and helped build the pitifully inadequate barrier which might, with Providence, stay the catastrophe until the little brown people could get clear.

"Y' shrimp!" muttered Sam, heaving a boulder into place, "I'll bash yer face in for what y' just said! Yellow, am I?"

A rumbling in the pit heralded another upward tide, and this time the molten stream squirted in through the cracks in the barrier like fiery serpents, hissing with venom. Sam was forced to pause in his tirade; he gasped heavily as a spouting jet of fire devoured his trousers leg from ankle to knee and peeled the skin from his flesh. He stole a fearful glance at Perry, and saw his shirt smoldering at the breast; but the little chap never ceased his labor. His small, pale face was the face of a martyr who, fearing his fate, yet dares it.

"Y' said I was a liar, an' I knows I am. Carter said so, too." Sam muttered on, but worked savagely in spite of the agony of the burn. He attacked the barrier as he might attack an enemy. He began to look upon that fiery threat of the crater as something personal. The glimpse he had got of Perry's face determined him to refuse to quit a job which the little shrimp could carry on at. But he growled as he worked—growled bitterly.

"I never been called yellow!" he muttered. "No man ever seen me quit 's long 's I c'd stand up, by ——! Yellow, am I? You wait, Mister Bloomin' Shrimp Perry!"

"Oh, shut yer gab!" panted Perry furiously. "No use doin' this unless somebody goes down and makes 'em clear out. Go on down, Sam, quick. I can finish this."

OUTSIDE the thunder crashed; the mountain shook and the cavern reverberated with deafening sound. Sam hurled his shoulder against a loosening boulder as the lava flood beat against it; the cavern floor became a steady stream of choking, fume-vomiting fire. It was a frenzy akin to that of the old Berserker which gripped Sam Thorpe while fighting against the inward pressure of that great boulder. The rock grew hot, and from all the crannies leaped fiery tongues and hissing steam. His powerful muscles cracked under the strain; his bulging eyes saw the pitifully futile efforts of Perry to help.

"Say, bo, you go down," Sam gasped, writhing in the agony of a foot which had been splashed for a moment by the burning fluid. "I'm stronger' you."

Deep down within him, under the crust of years of brutality and selfishness, there lived a voice, and now it told him in a fierce whisper that the barrier he had helped to build would only be a barrier for just so long as human power could brace it. With the knowledge came an access of strength, and an overmastering determination.

"Go on down, shrimp!" he repeated savagely, when Perry kept on toiling.

There was no response; the rock barrier was almost red-hot now; Sam wet a finger and touched a stone. It hissed; and a queer grin wreathed his rugged features and stayed there like a mask. He began to speak, in sharp, bitter tones, and his feet crunched into the floor with the terrific force of his exertions.

"Get outa here! Y'ain't doin' no good, anyhow. Y' can't help none here. Whyn't yuh go an' warn th' folks?"

Perry took no notice. He wasn't even looking at Sam. He didn't look up when Sam uttered a harsh, contemptuous laugh. The straining bully went on:

"I come up here to lick yuh, li'l shrimp. That can wait. But y' oughta hurry down there, Perry, bo. I left Carter playin' his cards fer th' gal again. I guess he has her down at his own place by now, an' he's chucklin' over th' way he fooled yuh wi' his books an' his——"

"You ——" burst from Perry. The other checked him before he could utter his thought.

"Oh, I know I'm a liar! But this ain't no lie, Perry. Honest to ——, it ain't. Carter's aimin' to make that li'l gal his woman——"

Perry jammed the rock he bore into a space in the barrier, and rushed from the cavern, leaping from crag to slope with utter disregard of limb or neck. He gave no further thought for the tottering giant whose failing strength alone stood between the people and disaster. His eyes fastened upon his hut, and to this he tore through the storm. Trees rocked about him, the earth quivered; and his mouth was dry, his eyes smarted, with a powdery cloud of hot ashes which even the terrific rain could not wholly dissipate or quench.

"I'll kill Carter! I'll kill him!" he panted as he reached the beach and plunged headlong into the hut.

In the doorway he collided with a small figure, and for the first time his burning eyes discerned the low-turned lamp. It was Jemima's glad voice which greeted him, and it brought him to a full stop in his muttered threats.

"Oh, I so glad, Pelly!" the child said; and as he looked down into her face he saw nothing there of fear for any threatened fate such as Sam Thorpe had hinted at. But she had her arms full of stores and blankets, and answered his enquiring stare.

"Misser Ca'ter he go tell de people to run. De mountain he bus' loose, he say. He look fo' you long time. I velly glad you come."

Before Perry could speak, Carter burst in,

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dripping with rain, his anxious face smeared with gray ash. Behind him trooped the entire population of Kalhara, all headed for the little bay and the canoes, every family bearing its worldly goods and as much food as possible.

"Oh, here you are!" blurted Carter with great relief. "I was afraid you would get caught. D'ye know the volcano's in eruption?"

BUT Perry dashed inside the hut, gathered up a load of necessaries, and with Jemima at his side plowed on down to the beach with the rest. As they crossed the tiny harbor to the outer head of land, they saw the crest of Kalhara lift like a great lid over a cauldron of fire; then came a dull, booming roar, and a spout of flaming lava leaped from the black hole in the mountainside, forming a remorseless torrent which poured down and overwhelmed the village they had just left.

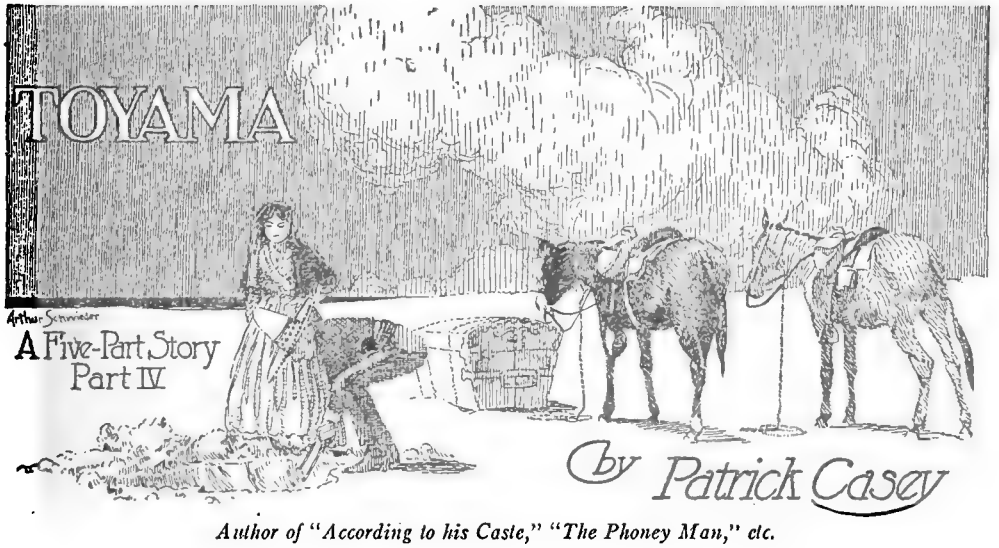
Into the sea it poured, to hiss and boil and cool into solid rock. And a few minutes later the mountain top dissolved into red-shot smoke, as the greater outpouring of earth's burdensome matter overflowed and rolled down to the sea on the farther side of the island.

"Sam! Poor old Sam!" mourned Perry with his fascinated gaze fixed upon the gaping source of that first raging torrent of fire. As if thrown upon a screen he saw Sam's action in its true light. He had lied. . . .

"Wonder where Thorpe is," remarked Carter, with a note of indifference. "I'm afraid he's caught. —— hard luck, even though the chap was a husky tough and a beastly liar, what?"

Perry soaked a blanket in the sea and made a shelter for the child against the fast falling cinders. He slowly met Carter's gaze, and answered him:

"Greatest liar I ever knew. A noble liar, Mr. Carter!"



Author of "According to his Caste," "The Phoney Man," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form

I, CHET OVERMAN, saw it myself—the treasure chest which we had dug up on the shore of Magdalena Bay—filled to overflowing with freshly minted Mexican gold pieces. It was the end of our quest: that quest which had sent us out from San Francisco on the bare word of Adolfo Ramerez de Valencia, alias Serafin Dicenta, an absconding paymaster of the Mexican army, who swore he had buried his loot here before he was arrested.

Dicenta had vanished and the bail we had put up for him was forfeit; but here was enough gold to satisfy all our claims, and there were only four of us to share it: Kit Morley, the reporter who had gained the Mexican's confidence; his wife; Jim Hathaway, captain of the *Seventy-Three*, a converted submarine chaser which had brought us there; and myself.

Jim and I wished that Mrs. Morley had not come, for we distrusted her. Now as we stood staring down on the wealth before us, I knew that already she coveted it all for her husband. Yet when she ordered me back to the ship to get Jim and some of the sailors to help move the chest, I went.

There was need for haste. The secret of the buried treasure was shared also by Mariquita, a beautiful Mexican said to be the discarded mistress of Dicenta. We believed her to be living inland with the Indians and feared she might attempt to regain the gold at any minute.

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A strange sight greeted us after we had the chest safely on board the *Seventy-three*. A ship sailed into the bay, flying the flag of Japan and laden with Japs, men and women in bright-colored kimonos. We watched them disembark under the leadership of a tall man, whose high hat and somber robe were covered with figures of mice. Late in the afternoon they tramped away across the desolate, cactus-covered sand dunes.

By signals we learned that the ship was the *Taisai Maru* and that the yellow people were to become cooks and camp-followers of Villa. Jim and I disbelieved this, and our alarm increased when later in the evening we found that the Morleys had deserted us. Through the gathering dusk we saw them boarding the *Taisai*.

We burst open the treasure chest; the gold was still there. A thick fog arose, drifting around us like a gray, impalpable wall. We weighed anchor and tried to escape. Useless. Our propellers had become entangled in the thick, lush seaweed of those Southern waters.

A MOMENT later we were boarded by the Jap crew, whose naked yellow bodies had been greased with oil. At the first attack Jim fell wounded. Again and again I emptied my revolver into that writhing mass.

The struggle was too unequal. Our crew were beaten and I, with a knife gash in my leg, was forced back against the rail. It gave under my weight and I found myself swimming desperately toward shore, through shark-infested waters. Once on land I made haste to put a safe distance between the treacherous Morleys and myself.

Suddenly from out of the darkness I heard a strange cry—

"Gov'ment agent."

An instant later a Japanese, one of the advance guard, hurled himself at me. As I crouched low he catapulted over me. Flinging myself on his back, I beat his face into the stony ground until he lay motionless.

Again I fled and again I heard that weird cry. A figure arose by my side. It was the Mouse-Man himself. He offered me no violence but in broken English tried to persuade me to return to the ship. I protested that I was not an agent of any government and meant his people no harm.

As I talked an odd thing happened. Believe me or not as you will; one of the mice embroidered on his robe moved! It crawled slowly up his sleeve and disappeared. As I stared he said again—

"You must return to your ship, please."

As we walked forward, the Japanese, whom I had knocked senseless, hurried up to us, his forehead still bloody.

Quickly in his own tongue he whispered to the Mouse-Man. I was able to understand only that he was telling of the raid on our ship. Much disturbed, the priest hurried toward the shore, leaving me with the man I had recently struck down.

We marched on through the night. A knife held at my back warned me that escape was futile.

Suddenly we heard a sound from a near-by thicket and I thought I saw a moving figure. Without a word my captor dashed forward and disappeared in the shade. A moment later I heard a cry, piercing and terrible. Running toward it in a panic, I stumbled over the Japanese, sprawled out dead, with an Indian knife in his breast. A moment later a crushing blow descended on my head. When I recovered consciousness I found myself in an Indian camp, among the followers of Mariquita. She herself bound up my wounds and assured me that I had no cause for fear. The Indians desired only to know the meaning of the sign of the mouse, which they had worshiped from prehistoric times, and to hear whether the Japanese meant them any harm.

As we talked I felt my suspicions of the beautiful girl slipping away, and could not believe the evil I had heard of her. My distress was great therefore when later she rushed in with flaming eyes, and in a passion-choked voice cried that I had betrayed them to the Japanese, who were marching toward their village under the leadership of Morley, who, she insisted, was no other than Serafin Dicenta, the treacherous Mexican.

Immediately preparations were made to send out a war-party. Resentment at the thought of the Morleys' treachery and curiosity as to whether the reporter was really Dicenta, spurred my desire to accompany the Indians.

Fortunately I had been able to gain the good-will of Metztli, the high priest, and despite Mariquita's protests he permitted me to go with the party. A horse was given to me and we set out—the Indians clay-coated with Mausers swung over their bronzed shoulders.

During the ride I managed to convince Mariquita that her suspicions of me were unfounded, and she in turn told me of her life in Mexico and of the amazing accidents which had brought her here.

Her father had been a wealthy landowner whose *rancho* covered many acres. Here they had lived in peace until the outbreak of the revolution. One of the first to rise had been Serafin Dicenta, one of her father's tenants. He had joined the Colorados, a desperate band acknowledging no party, whose burning and looting were terrorizing the countryside.

While Mariquita was at her convent Dicenta brought her a message from her father, ordering her to return to him at once. Bewildered that their enemy should be in her father's confidence, yet sure of the authenticity of the letter, she rode back with Dicenta.

You can imagine her grief when she found her father dying, after being tortured by bandits. The old man who believed he had been rescued by Dicenta, begged his daughter with his last breath, to marry the tenant.

Mariquita, terror-stricken and alone, would have obeyed had not Father Pio, the village priest, whispered his suspicions to her. He had seen Dicenta talking with a Japanese of the village, whose house bore the mystic sign of the mouse, and he believed the bandit to be guilty of unutterable crimes.

"My child," he said, "you shall never marry this man. Perhaps tonight God will show us what to do."

Mariquita was comforted by the words of the aged priest, but when she thought of the old man and herself pitted against the strength of the resourceful Dicenta her heart sank. However, she resolved to sell her life dearly if need be and a feeling of satisfaction came to her as she thought that perhaps Serafin would be repaid for some of the evil he had wrought. She entered the *casa* and prepared for what the night would bring forth.

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CHAPTER XXV

THE GHOULS

THE night set in pitch-black. The wind rose in steadiness and violence. It came down off the mountain-tops with a faraway booming roar and whistled round the corners of the gray stone *casa* like the shrieking of damned and bedeviled souls. Ever and anon, some occult flare would weld earth to heaven, crack the sky, inflame the black racing rolls of clouds, and stream the lashing jack-pines and low cottages of the valley in such calcium glare that they stood out like cardboard scenery on a stage. Far off, continually, thunder rumbled like great guns.

Mariquita had not slept the night prior, nor did she think of sleeping now. Twice she left her room with its cheerily crackling fire to run downstairs through the boisterous tumult to the men's quarters. But neither priest nor Dicenta had arrived.

The last time shattered her nerve. She was forced each time to pass the room that had been her father's bedchamber. She had heard an eery creaking; probably it was only the straining of the massive edifice to withstand the fury of the gale; but she felt she was no longer equal to gliding down that dark passage again and alone.

Her uneasiness increased as the weather grew worse. She feared some misfortune might have overtaken the one friend left in the world, Father Abogado. She went out to the comparative shelter, behind the fluted columns of the inner piazza, to peer across the dim *patio* and down the plack portal for sound or sight of the priest.

The iron-barred gate was rattling continuously as if under incessant hammering and she had to steel herself and listen tensely to make sure she had heard no certain knocking, no shout of voices. The night seemed alive with voices, variant in pitch, wailing up with sad fierceness, dying away into quavering misery, and echoing forever and frightfully in that open sounding-board of a *patio*.

From the arch overhead, as her fingers gripped the ledge, a powder of tinder rot dusted down on her mantilla, as if in truth the solid stone structure was trembling to the pounding of the squalls. Below in the *patio* the beech-trees were rubbing limbs and leaves together with sawing groans. Lightning fused all, on a sudden, in blinding dazzle. She could see then the trees bending agonizedly, seemingly unaccountably; but really writhing to terrific drafts that shrilled through the portal and the force of which were broken for her by the sheltering vibrating columns.

Blackness fell like a blow and the wan whiteness of the night-blooming cereus, hedging the *patio* garden, glowed out dim and mysterious below like floating balls of smoky blue. From up the valley came a tremendous prolonged crash, distinct in all the din, as if before the blast of a more violent squall some mighty pine had been uprooted and mowed down.

She could stand this no longer. Perhaps the *Padre*, on his way to the *casa*, had been caught beneath that overthrown tree. Her mind was a hornets' nest of misgivings and turbulent dreads. Up the winding staircase into the nearest cupola, she raced, to look about the valley. What she could hope to see on such a night was a question. But she felt she must do something.

The straining, shrieking watch-tower was like a balloon riding in a tempest. Through the loop-holes the wind cut screechingly. She made to slide open a wooden wicket in the very teeth of the storm; but it was smashed against its grooves, bent inward before the wild general fury, jammed beyond her feeble power to move it.

She forced open, finally, a port-hole away from the wind. She peered out. The rushing air lashed icily at the backs of her ears, chilled her cheeks, stung her eyes to tears. The fleecy ends of the mantilla shrilled as with the hiss and zip of electricity. She was deafened by the clamor, blinded by the disruptive velocity. Everything was a blot of black detonating uproar.

Suddenly, with the feeling that it was more imagined illusion than sane optical perception, she made out, off to one side down the valley, a pin-point of yellow light.

It persisted, a saffron spark, bobbing up and down, seeming to rush toward her, then halting for long moments as if it were the light of a lantern carried by some one who followed the inequalities of the footpath and who plunged forward in the quieter pauses and then was staggered and taken aback by the more furious squalls.

Her first dread was that it was Colorados. But no; such cowards would wait for more propitious weather, a dark night without squalls being sufficient cover for their slinking movements. Furthermore, it would not be like them to carry a revealing lantern, though there was but little chance of the light being seen in the wrack of that night.

She could not believe it was that heartless one, Dicenta, ordinarily so careful of his mustache and nails, chancing now the violence of the wind, the hurtling limbs flaked from the trees, merely to return to inform her of the result of the negotiatiods.

No; it could be only one person, Father Pio Abogado, bresting all the furry and flying death of the storm just to keep the promise given.

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SHE quickly decided to rush down the winding stairs and open the gate for the battered wayfarer. She felt sure it was the priest. His light had drawn by now very close to the *casa*. As she made to close the wooden wicket, suddenly it blinked out as if in some swirling quirk of wind. That hastened her steps.

She paused in her bareheaded rush, the mantilla fallen about her neck, on the very edge of the *patio*. What was this sharp quietude that had so suddenly and absolutely settled down? The hullabaloo of wind was gone; the air was stirless, muggy, close with the moist smell of peach-trees and cereus. It was a soundlessness of silence, appalling after the din, as if the whole world were waiting petrified in the face of some impending happening, a finger on its lip.

She heard a thick thudding, once, twice, on the stone flagging. Something squashed on her bare head, heavy, viscous, like a fallen toad. Her hair was wet with a great splash of water.

Then came an immense reverberation from the vault of heaven, the mighty echo of a far-off bellow, and then the rain, a pelt of huge moist balls, a solid, vertical never-ending fall of water. In the twinkling of dashing across the open *patio* to the portal, Mariquita was drenched through and from head to foot.

The iron gate was no longer rattling. What wind stirred came only in damp capfuls. Their blare of triumph over, the elements had settled down to the mournful business of the rain.

Outside, as she peered between the sleek bars of the gate, was only a black brooding hum. No one waited admittance. But of a sudden up the valley the yellow light reappeared, a faint misty gleam, and seemed to move on at a fair pace in the direction of the family vault.

Instantly she thought of ghouls, of ignorant and famished villagers who might believe that the wealth of her father was buried there in the tomb with him. She flung open the gate and clutching the mantilla about her head, up the footpath, pell-mell in all the downpouring deluge she ran.

The probability is that she would have dashed madly up to the nocturnal gypsies had not her slippered foot struck in the muddy path something soft and doughy like yielding flesh. She screamed into the persistent hum and started back, and heard the thing flap over in a vagrant gust, like some flopping toad or wounded fluttering bird. She got her will between her teeth; reached down all at once and felt beneath her fingers a hat, a soft soggy bowl-crowned hat that she sensed rather than saw was black wool. It was the shovel hat of Father Pio Abogado!

The shock was complete. It sobered her while it fluttered her brain with grisly fear. Had her only friend been killed? Was that the reason for the light ahead—some clandestine burial? She went on, horror slowing her steps; but still she seemed to make better progress than those with the lantern, for slowly the yellow flame brightened, its rays dancing through the slithers of rain with wide and wider refractions.

She began hazily to distinguish the bulks of five men, one of whom walked ahead with the lantern, the others following behind and bent toward each other as if under the burden of a black vagueness on their shoulders. She thought once she heard the sound of their voices but when she paused to listen there drummed in her ears only the great brooding melancholy of the rain. A little ahead, between the lantern and herself, something dark and quick slipped across the path, blotting out the radiant gleam for a moment. It was some startled timber-wolf, she judged, making for the brush to one side.

The light widened its glistening radius as with the soaked felt hat in one tense hand, the soggy ends of the mantilla in the other, she drew close. She could make out the wet sheen of the underwood to either hand, the moist glimmer of the leather puttees on the legs close to the lantern, the muddied fringes of a sash trailing from the waist of one of the burdened men, the silver-braided tight pantaloons on another.

The lantern was slung low to reveal the puddles and pitfalls of the path. Above the middle, therefore, the men were merged into the filmy obscurity of that heavy object on their shoulders which was blacker than the dark.

Again in a capful of wind, came the unintelligible accents of a man. She saw the lantern rise up, as though at the end of an upraised arm; got a fleeting impression of short bolero jackets, dark visages, bandanna-wrapped heads; caught a crackling and rending of growths splitting electrically the monotonous booming; and then the light vanished as completely as if quenched.

Penetrating with needle sharpness through the thrumming downpour came then a voice, vibrant with impatience, chilling her with its familiar quality:

"What snails of the earth you fellows are anyway! Here, I'm holding the lamp low for your feet. Step quickly, my *compadres!*"

"Hola, man!" retorted a chesty voice, rumbling with resentment louder than the rain. "Haven't we trouble a-plenty getting over this tree? Don't hurry us that way, Dicenta! We're doing the best we can and besides the night's long."

"Enough, El Vivillo," exclaimed the fearful tones of Dicenta. "Don't bellow fit to raise the dead!"

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SHE knew then. It was that treacherous one, that snake in the grass, Serafin Dicenta, who was lighting the way for these nomads of the night. Some blasted tree lay athwart the path and they were experiencing no little difficulty clambering over it with that mysterious weighty burden on their shoulders. What could that burden be? The slain body of good Padre Pio?

The smell of hot metal and of acrid burning oil assailed her nostrils through the turbid moistness. She made out the glistening yellow lantern, all at once and immediately ahead, behind the ragged dripping lattice of leafage and limbs on the fallen tree. The voices of the men came plainly to her ears, as they broke through the tangle, variant in tone, but coherently persistent through the drum of rain.

"Well, God knows," one was saying—he of the chesty voice, "this trunk is getting a better burial tonight than ever its owner got. Whew, what a bloated pig was that Carranzista lieutenant with all this gold! My shoulder is breaking. Will you take more of the weight, Ruiz, you shirker, you!"

"I'm carrying every ounce I can bear, El Vivillo. The —— chest shifted on top of you and me when we dropped down off that limb ahead of the others. Lift a little back there, you lazy *peons!*"

"God deliver us from such folk!" exclaimed sardonically, from nearer hand, the throaty voice of the tight-pantalooned man in the rear. "These sons of sin would revile Satanas, their own father! Have patience my *compañeros*, till we get altogether out of this mess of brush. Remember, as the old saying says, that a climb with friends is easy as a descent."

"Softly, El Saltador," warned the higher tones of Dicenta. "Gently now, my golden ones. It's the pound of all this infernal rain that's adding to the weight."

"Well, I don't like this night one bit," returned the deep notes of the small man in front, who seemed much given to querulous complaint. It was he who was called El Vivillo or the Lively Little One, Mariquita gathered, and she could see him kick back viciously ever so often at the slapping ends of his trailing sash.

"This devil's tattoo of rain," he went on, "puts me in mind of the splatter of our bullets when we made that paymaster dance to our powder play. And that's not nice to think of when one has to burgle a tomb of the dead."

"*Carajo*, yes!" agreed his close companion, Ruiz, who appeared always and forcibly to echo his whines. "And did you mark that scream in the night back there a while ago? It was like the scream of that Carranzista when we cut off the soles of his feet for the dance in the thorny cholla!"

"I'll tell you," said a new voice, an oddly quavering voice, "I feel a fear of the Dio' Todopoderoso on a night like this and a little prayer now for the repose of that lieutenant's soul might not go amiss!"

"Fear increases religion, it seems," remarked with cutting scorn that ironic one beside him, he of the tight silver-braided pantaloons called El Saltador or the Leaper. But how is one to pray to the Almighty God, Niño del Zapatero," he added, "if one does not know the name of the paymaster?"

"True, my fine Leaper," concurred, gullibly, the Child of the Shoemaker. "But do you recollect the name, or you, Ruiz, or you, my Lively Little One?"

Mariquita reached the outflung leafage of the blasted tree even as, upbearing the rear of the trunk, the Leaper and Child of the Shoemaker disengaged themselves from the tangle a dozen feet beyond. She wondered whether to clamber up and continue through, thus chancing the disclosing loud crackle of the brush. She waited, listening tensely in the mournfulness of rain, to allow of a certain dulling distance to intervene.

"No, I don't recall it, Child," returned Ruiz.

"I'm feeling the front of the trunk," said the chesty tones of the Lively Little One, "but there's no bulge of paint. He didn't have his name printed on the trunk, that lieutenant. Confound it, the rain's dripping down into my armpits!"

"Well, the good Lord will understand, never fear, Infant," taunted the Leaper, that ironic one. "Just say you pray for the poor paymaster who lost the last quota of gold from the El Dorado Mine!"

"*Silencio*, you buffoons, you!" came sharply from Dicenta in the lead. "Don't you know, what little wind there is, breathes full against you and may carry your voices to the *casa*. Speak soft, my children."

There was a chorus of guffaws from "the children."

"In all this drum of rain, man!"

"Listen to our little Serafin, now, all puffed up like a rooster over his new uniform!"

"It does fit him surprizing well, don't you think, Lively Little One?"

"He believes he's a Carranzista lieutenant himself, Leaper!"

"But a prayer, now," persisted the voice of the shoemaker's son who feared Almighty God. "If one could but recall that name——"

"Za, you suckling of Satanas!" bit out Dicenta, snarlingly. "It was Valencia, if you must know—Adolfo Ramerez de Valencia. I found it sewed inside this coat of his. And now here's the vault. Name of —— you ladrones, don't set down that chest! I have a key; it won't take a jiffy to open the door."

"He has a key!" rallied the Lively Little One. "See how much our lieutenant is trusted by the

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Señorita with the golden eyes and mouth that is a nest for kisses!"

"He's a crafty one surely," agreed Ruiz as there came in a sudden gust the metallic creaking of a steel door swinging heavily on its hinges. "You watch our *lagarto*. He'll soon be top-crow of the whole roost!"

"And then the little Serafin won't notice one of his old bad *compadres* of the Colorados, snapped that bitter one, the Leaper. "You watch and see that, Ruiz and Niño, and you too, Lively Little One!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LONG ARM OF GOD

MARIQUITA did not continue on through the tangle of uprooted tree. She knew enough now, altogether too much for any peace of mind. It had all come to her, not with the abruptness of a flare of lightning, but more as as if a long cord dipped in gunpowder had been ignited inside her head. Crackling and flashing, figuratively the fuse had burned as the men talked and tilted; there had come a rushing sizzle, the bits of conversation had welded into glowing concatenated links; and then in an intense and sulfurous explosion, the whole plot had burst and seared itself into her brain.

She knew now all she had fairly ached to know. Every move in the elaborate and unscrupulous intrigue was bared; the waylaying of the Carranzista paymaster, the use of the Japanese *comerciante* as a fence, the fearful rush of the Colorados to save the chest of gold from her father, the ruthless wounding and hanging.

She saw through the acute subtlety of Dicenta, his brazen assumption of the uniform of the slain paymaster, the heartless advantage taken of her father's extremity, the mouth-reverence he had done herself. He planned with hypocrisy and lip-service and keen artifice, to gain control of the whole *hacienda* and even of herself. Still running with the wolves, he was even then profaning the tomb of her loved ones with his blood-tainted gold. He was indeed a Judas, betraying under the guise of friendship.

Only remained unsolved the presence in the path of the shovel-shaped soggy hat that she now crushed in her fingers. Where was the good priest, Father Pio Abogado? Had he been near that night? Or was it that, shot down like a dog in the village street, come of his righteous but discovered espionage, his hat had been worn in grim mockery by a bandanna-wrapped head and then carelessly tossed aside?

She went down the slushy path through the brooding persistency of rain. Once she looked back. The spark of lantern-light was no longer visible; but showing they were inside, the mouth of the vault appeared like the gaping radiant vent of a yellow-bright furnace.

She had reached the wrought-iron gate of the *casa* and was about to swing it open to go within when, all at once above the steady boom of the rain she caught the sharp rattle of displaced stones, the soggy slap and stumble of racing feet. Like a live quivering thing, the gate shook under her hand as some one slammed full-tilt into it.

She stiffened frigidly, froze dumb and paralyzed, her blood congealed, her heart like a lump of ice in her mouth. There was a panting, labored and heavy as though wheezing up through the thick walls of a masculine throat. A hand feeling along the bars of the gate for the latch touched her sleeve. Two cries split the booming night, one her own, the other that of a man hideously affrighted.

Her arm shivered under a grasp, tight and crushing as the clutch of talons. Then, suddenly, swiftly, inexplicably, there was an abrupt loosening of the vise-grip.

"Heart of God, a woman!" burst on her ears in a familiar and glorious voice. "Speak; for the love of the Virgin of Atocha, woman, say something!"

"Father Pio! I thought you were dead! I found your hat. Here, I ——"

"You saw all, Mariquita?" he asked, as he took the soaked headgear she pressed upon him.

"Yes, everything. It is terrible, abominable! And you, *Padre?*"

He slouched the hat down upon his head.

"I followed them from the village through the brush. The gale and then the drumming rain covered what noises I made. I lost my hat, scraped off by some limb. I'd have gone back for it, but I thought I heard something behind. That was you, *niñita?*"

"Yes, yes," she nodded vehemently, her hair and wet mantilla flinging a little shower of spray. "And it was you in turn that I saw, then, streaking quick and dark across the path like a wolf startled from the timbers."

"Yes; but you had better go within now my little one. Why, God pity us, you are drenched through and through!"

Mariquita sensed the simulated surprize in his voice. He must have known, surely, that she would be saturated, out in all that brooding downpour of rain. She perceived that he was concerned more with bundling her hastily into the *casa* and beyond harm's reach than with any sudden uneasiness about her health.

What was afoot? He had ceased panting, yet his voice still was taut and jerky as with poorly suppressed agitation. She peered through the pervading rain and darkness into his thin and somber face.

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"What are *you* going to do, Padre Pio?" she asked sharply.

The priest spoke slowly, thickly, as if each word cost him great inward effort.

"I am going to remain here, child, in the blackness of the portal just inside the gate. Serafin will return to the *casa*—alone—to cover up his tracks. He will be here shortly. That's why I ran, stumbling, slapping mud, hastily. Look, *niña!*" He grasped her arm.

"The light is coming out of the vault—down the path!"

"But he is armed, Father!" The girl resisted his urging hand.

"He is younger and far stronger than you!"

"My child, go within and leave all this to me," he said, as if pained by her fears. "The man is weak with the burden of his crimes, dreading discovery. The Lord is between us and harm. Dicenta will prove a cowardly rat when cornered alone.

"But see," he hastened her, "the light is approaching rapidly. They must have heard our screams in the night. Go within, Mariquita *mia*, do please," he begged, "and warm yourself without any more qualms for old Father Pio."

"But, *Padre!*"

He opened the gate and gently but forcibly shoved her within. He peered between the sleek bars, his pools of eyes blazing lambently like cold stars.

"I am strong with need, my little one, the strength of the righteous. But even should the good *Dios* fail me," he added grimly, "there is a heavy gun under the folds of my cassock!"

SUBMISSIVELY though quaking with misgivings, Mariquita went then through the black portal across the spattered booming *patio* and up to her room with its fire graying on the open hearth. She threw off the moist mantilla, lighted a candle on the small table of native mahogany and heaped with trembling hands some oak-knots on the embers.

Strange brooding noises came down the flue, filled the room as with the rush of wings. There was an intermittent crackling from the catching oak-knots and a steady rapping at the shutters of the outboard windows like the drumming of wet slugs or soliciting fingers. She made ado to change her slippers and clammy stockings. With all the sounds and long shaking shadows, she was rapidly vaulting into an overtaxing excitement.

She stamped into the dry slippers and got abruptly afoot. She had heard a stirring outside—feet stumbling up the stairs, dragging heavily along the corridor. Her distress was sharpened, rather than subdued. With face ghastly white, she flung open the door.

Serafin Dicenta stood without, drenched and shivering, his khaki coat awry, sombrero gone and blood darkening his blond hair, matting it to his forehead and trickling viscously down the trough of his right temple. Behind him, long bluish jaw protruding like a knob of azurite, eyes cold pools of menace, a heavy .45 in hand, its long barrel nosing the protuberances of Dicenta's spine, was Father Pio Abogado.

The priest gave the khaki-clad Colorado chieftain a stiff nudge with the gun that sent him spread-legged, into the room. Then, his black muddied skirts flapping soggily, he stepped within, swung shut the door to the bolt. He spoke, sharp and staccato:

"Feel his uniform for any bulge of weapons, Mariquita. I made him throw away one gun out there in the portal. He may have others."

But there was no shape of revolver or knife in the fellow's pockets, under his belt, beneath the armpits. Doubly sure then of his powerlessness to harm, the priest went to the slim-legged chair behind the mahogany table, and sat down.

On the polished red-brown surface of the table, he placed the .45, glinting with threat under the flicker of the candle and close to his long dry bony fingers. He looked up at the sullen Colorado, for an appreciable time, his nether lip sucked in between strong white teeth, his dark deep-sunk eyes smoldering in his emaciated dry-skinned face.

It was, paradoxically, like a scene from the Spanish Inquisition with Father Pio Abogado sitting for Fray Tomas Torquemada. The rain thrummed hollowly in the chimney; now and anon, a stray drop falling, would cause a sharp sizzling among the red coals; and always there was that tapping on the shutters like the insistent ticking of many clocks pulsating off the moments of life ere imminent death. At last the priest spoke:

"There shall be no marriage, *mi lagarto*, between Mariquita and such as you. We see through all your treachery. You are no lieutenant of Venustiano Carranza. You are a wolf in sheep's clothing, a Colorado in the uniform of a Carranzista! You captured this paymaster of Carranza's army, this *Teniente* Adolfo Ramerez de Valencia——"

Dicenta stifled a sharp ejaculation, drew his legs together and straightened from his sullen apathy. His washy blue eyes focused on the priest with swift watchfulness and something of growing fear.

"Ah!" exclaimed Father Pio, a wry smile twisting his thin lips. "The *buho*, our little sullen owl, has decided to be more the social animal! We interest him strangely with what we know. But we know a deal more. It was from this paymaster that our *teniente* got the uniform that fitted him so well before he was mussed up. He robbed the paymaster of his

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clothes and chest of gold, cut off the soles of the Carranzista's feet and then made him to dance, in the spikes of cholla, to the merry sprinkling of his bullets.

"Then our little bravo took the chest of gold, which the paymaster was carrying from the new mint that Carranza has been quick to start here in Chihuahua at the old El Dorado workings, and he brought the heavy trunk to the tippling-shop of his friend the Japanese, down in Guadalupe.

"El Cenizo was questioning the Japanese *amigo* when word was sent to our redoubtable Dicenta and he unleashed his wolves to capture Don Jorge, to torture and practically kill him. But Señor Dicenta did not want El Cenizo altogether killed. He had a cunning scheme. He would ride up in his sheep's clothing, cut down the generous *hacendado* and thereby win back his favor forever. It would be but a step then to marry the daughter and gain thus the whole *estancia*.

"He never dreamt, coward that he was, that any one would dare to disobey the orders of his frightful Colorados and release the crucified man; but the good Lord gave that courage to one of the least of his servants. Still, he stripped the priest of the honor and in order effectually to worm himself into El Cenizo's broken heart, lied like a Judas to the iron man as he lay in earthly purgatory.

"Oh, you abomination!" the priest cried out, leaping to his feet, leaning far forward over the table, unable longer to restrain his loathing of the creature. "You have wheedled the poor little orphan of Don Jorge from her safe retreat in the *colegio*. You have taken advantage of a dying man to extort a command of marriage. You have coiled your slimy tentacles about the letters patent to all this *hacienda*. And now, like a sacrilegious sneak, a foul ghoul, a vampire of the night, you have despoiled and desecrated the tomb of the consecrated dead with your chest of bloody gold!"

His black pools of eyes flamed fanatically, as with some strange inspiration.

"There is only one way out for you, Dicenta," he said. "Tonight, you and Mariquita will ride over the jungled mountains down into Sinaloa. You will follow the Rio del Fuerte to where it bisects the Mexican branch of the Southern Pacific Railway. There, if the road is running, you will take train to Nogales across the Border, or else to Mazatlan where you can get ship to the American States!"

IT WAS an astounding dénouement, bewildering with its seeming lack of retribution, sequence, logic, plain common sense. The girl gasped, then stiffened paralytically with sheer horror. Dicenta's pale blue eyes darted from the priest to her and back again, wide with amazement, incredulous, yet fascinated and sharpened with uncontrollable hope like the eyes of a cornered rat that suddenly sees a way out.

The priest sat down heavily, watching every move of the man, his cold black eyes narrowing, his lean mouth pulling down with detestation unrestrainable. He tapped the butt of the .45 under dry waiting significant fingers.

"The fox sees a loop-hole, eh?" he asked, caustic as acid. "A break in the wall around him, a method of escape? He thinks Father Abogado loco, a buffoon and a fool! But you should realize, Dicenta, I would sooner trust a snake than you, on such a delicate errand, did I not hold completely the whip-hand of you.

"Oh!" he shrugged. "It is not merely now, this gun here and your impotence to injure! If that were all, I should go myself; I would never leave my poor little one to chance your cajolery and possible treachery. But I am remaining behind for a good purpose. I have work to do, such work as will put me high in the saddle, spurred and becropped, to ride you to my every wish and command, to lash and kick and torment you to fulfill my will, though you be miles away!

"Listen closely now," he continued, "and don't let your expectations of possible trickery cause you to miss one point. You will quickly see they all are important. You shall go tonight, within this hour. You shall take the chest of gold that lies in the family vault. It will be easy to sling from a sumpter-horse; it is oblong and flat and will prove little bigger than Mariquita's portmanteau which we will hang from the other side.

"Tomorrow, late, I will enter the *botiga* of the Japanese and tell him that the bird Dicenta, has flown with all the loot. I will lead the Japanese and the Lively Little One, Ruiz, the Child of the Shoemaker and that scoffer, the Leaper, up here and show them the vault, empty of the heavy chest. I will say that you fled northward, with the *señorita* and all the money, through Chihuahua for the American border. It will be a white lie for my little girl, which should throw them off the track, and God, I think will forgive me!"

Dicenta drew himself up as if to withstand a mortal blow. The blood trickled afresh from the wound in his head under the pound of his stung emotion.

"I see, Padre Pio!" he said, his voice shaking and vibrant as a taut wire. "You would have me turn traitor to my Colorados so that they will pursue me with all fury and, even if I escape them, lie in wait for me to return here or show up somewhere within their reach. That's fine instruction from a man of the cloth!

"And how about the chest of gold? You have said yourself that it was secured through the killing of the Carranzista paymaster. Will

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God forgive His priest this shocking terrible sin, this aiding and abetting of robbery and cold murder!"

Little crow's-feet of sardonic humor wrinkled the outer corners of the priest's deep eyes.

"These expressions of outraged decency do you great glory, my sly tricky one," he said satirically. "They go to show that no matter how debased we may become, we still retain a conception of right and wrong. Still they would sound most strange coming from such as you, did I not perceive clearly from them that you get my points admirably. Dicenta," he bit out, with clipping protruding uncompromising jaw, "you are but feigning all this fine sense of honor merely to cloak your feelings of keenest mortification, your utter chagrin at the blasting of all your vain hopes of treachery, of getting off scot-free!"

He calmed swiftly, spreading his hands on the table before him, palms out, as if exposing a suit of cards he had held hidden all along.

"You see now, *señor*, how completely I have the high hand of you," he said. "I have frustrated all chance of further duplicity from you, hedged you round with harassing driving fear. I have sicked your own wolves upon you; you will never again be able to run with the pack; you will be fit only to be dragged down and eaten. The torture endured by poor El Cenizo will be but a mercy compared to your agonies should the Colorados ever catch you—a traitor!

"About the chest of gold, you need have no fear of further bloodying your hands with it. That gold belongs to Mariquita. Oh, I know full well that you got it through the robbing and torturing and ultimate killing of the Carranzista paymaster. But there is no law in this country; the recognized government is powerless to protect its own citizens. Tonight, for instance, Mariquita, through no fault of her own, is forced to desert a *rancheria* worth in stock on the hoof, in crops ungarnered, thousands, hundreds of thousands of pesos. What justice is there in that, unless we of God intervene to say nay this can not be, and to carry out the dictates of simple mercy and charity, pity and just due. Tonight I am the law, the long arm of God!"

He was tigerishly afoot again, his deep fanatic eyes ruffled with emotion like black pools blown upon, a long dry bony finger pointing at the quivering girl.

"I say to you, Mariquita *mia*," he spoke thickly, "take this chest of gold as payment for the *estancia* you can not carry with you and which, through no sin of you or your fathers, you are compelled to desert and leave forever behind. When you get to the States, you can ship back the letters patent and all the deeds to Venustiano Carranza and suffer him to take over the place in lieu of the money gone. You will be robbed at that, of many thousands of hidalgos!"

He swung the impaling finger at the man.

"You have the deeds, Dicenta. Here give them to me!"

"But I don't want this money!" interposed the girl, her hands at once out and beseeching, her eyes like fires of supplication in the white altar of her face. "Oh, Father, I am afraid! I don't want to go with this man! He fills me with fear, loathing. I want you to go with me, please, please! Oh, Father, why can't we bind this wretch and leave, you and I, without his gold?"

The long dry bony finger of the priest thudded heavily to the table; his head shook slowly from side to side; his dark pools of eyes trembled with acute solicitude for her. Were the girl's fears to prove the insurmountable obstacle to the accomplishment of all his well laid plans, to frustrate his hopes for her safety and altogether thwart the flight to the States, that desideratum, so devoutly to be wished, so imperative to be consummated?

DICENTA had made a movement toward the inside breast pocket of his coat. Watching closely, sure now that no eye was on him in the general emotional tenseness, he dropped his hand sharply as if paralyzed to his side.

"Mariquita *mia*," said the priest earnestly, "I see my duty pointing inflexibly one way—to remain here to cover up and entirely obliterate your tracks. If we left Dicenta behind securely bound as you suggest, he might strain loose and rouse his Colorados ere we had gone a league.

"This way I stay behind to force the pursuit in the wrong direction and to foment, besides, the hatred for your escort. The taking of the chest of gold is a feature absolutely necessary. It is the spark to fire the ricks, the pricking to draw the blood of these frightful wolves and cause them, only in blood, to seek their revenge.

"Ah, don't fear, my little one!" he begged. "You will go armed, heavily armed. The *señor* of the high sense of honor, we shall trust with weapons of no sort or order. My child, as your poor father so well realized and dreaded, Mexico is a terrible place nowadays for a girl traveling alone. It is only because of this that I am compelling this man to act as your escort.

"But look, child. He must protect you in order to protect himself. He can not return here nor do anything amiss, lest you tell who he is to some wandering pack of Colorados. The news of this treason will forerun you like a wind and every wolf will be out, slinking, furtive, tireless, to drag down the chest and to slash and kill.

"Dicenta can not penetrate the larger centers

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of the coast where the recognized government is strong, without fearing that you might impart, to the Carranzistas, your knowledge of the wanton killing of the paymaster. In every way he is hog-tied. To protect himself he must protect you!

"Mariquita," he ended, "this Dicenta is as full of wit and guile as Satanas himself. He is one of the devil's own. But his very keenness in roguery is your surest safeguard. I am the Hound of Heaven! So shall I manage things while I remain behind here that, to survive himself, Dicenta must needs use his last ounce of diabolic ingenuity to safely transport you and your little chest of gold to proper sanctuary in the United States."

Within the hour, knee-booted and riding-habited, a rubber *serape* over her shoulders, a Colt at either hip and about her waist a belt weighted with clips, Mariquita lent her aid to the two men in lifting the chest upon the pack-animal; then bade a strained farewell to the grim old priest and hastened up the valley, through the mournfulness of rain, in the rear of the hangdog Dicenta and the sumpter-horse laden with gold.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE CRYSTAL CANVAS

THE girl paused in her recital, to produce a linen kerchief and hold it to her lips. She thought probably by breathing through its cambric weave to lessen the scorching of her lungs. It was a futile shift. Physically it could relieve her not a whit, though it might have been hypnotically conducive to mental ease, like the opening of a closet door in a stifling room.

The mid-afternoon was on the desert with shriveling blast. There was not a breath of wind. The sun, dropping west of meridian, was burnishing the sky with coppery glow, blazing out like some luminous disk of fluid metal. Beneath, with heat, the windless air heaved and quivered.

The sweat rimmed the stiffened handkerchief about my head with a myriad of globules. Now and anon the moist bubbles would coalesce in tiny hot trickles, drip to the dappled baked hair of the pinto and there almost immediately evaporate. I longed for more overhang of brow and less sheeny protuberance of cheek to soothe my eyes.

Metztli, the high priest, still was ambling in the lead. But no longer did he look coloriully zebra-striped with red, blue and yellow barrings. In the molten eye of sun he was but a dark smudge. He seemed imposed a little above us. Only from that could I judge that we were jogging up a long and most gradual ascent.

The crest of the rise stretched, like a taut vibrating string, thin and heat-wavering across the brassy sky. As Metztli gained it, outlined himself and nag above it, the thick legs of the cob came to sudden standstill, the high priest seemed to lift and stiffen stark upright, and then his two arms went outflung like the black arms of a cross. Through the shimmering air came, after long interval, his shout.

I dug my *guarachas* into the pony's flanks to spur his jog.

"What's up, Mariquita?" I asked.

"It must be the Salina," she replied, her voice muffled slightly by the linen kerchief. "Somewhere hereabouts, where there was formerly a great inland lake, that salt bed stretches out like an immense pan of silver. Salt is as you know an invaluable condiment to meat-eating people and especially where they are located far from the sea, a substance most difficult to obtain. Metztli is but throwing out his arms as a sign of humility and thanks to Tonatiuh, the god of the sun, who he believes produces the salt. Like all flesh-consumers since the dawn of time, these Guiacuras regard saline deposits as a peculiar gift of the gods."

"Almost the words of Plato," I nodded ready comprehension. "I remember now the old Greek philosopher called salt 'a substance dear to the gods.' "

"And Homer before him sang of it as 'divine,' " she rejoined aptly. "In the Dark Ages, the German tribes, avid meat-gluttons, used to wage war for the possession of saline springs. They held as an article of faith that the presence of salt in a soil invested the district with certain sanctity. It is much that way with these Guiacuras.

"Besides," she went on, removing the handkerchief from her lips, "the numerous mirages of green bushes and pools of water which often hang above the white salt in the brilliant air have added cogently to their superstitious awe of the place. They believe the Salina a vantage point from which to propitiate and solicit the gods."

"Heat refractions," I concluded. "And that's why it's so blazing hot here. The salt not only transmits but intensifies the power of the heat-waves."

WE WERE nearing the crest of the long gradual acclivity. Slowly Metztli was emerging from a dark smudge into the familiar colorful figure of yellow, blue and red. Then all at once ere we quite topped the rise, smote us like a blow the glare of the salt-sink.

It was like a field of dazzling snow. A vast bed of infinitesimal particles fused into the hard brilliancy of diamonds, devouring the invisible and high-velocity light rays, belching

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them forth from innumerable facets in countless refractions and scintillations, it lay in shallow concavity before us, sweeping away into dancing distance, a quivering coruscating sheet of intense blinding white. Above, the air flickered like quicksilver, volatile as gossamer, pure and sparkling as drops of dew.

The sight bludgeoned the eyeballs. I was glad to turn for relief toward Metztli. The high priest still was straddling the reddish cob, stiffly erect and arms outflung; but he was not looking straight ahead in the direction I had pursued, full into the fiery eye of the sun. His mud-curled head was twisted on his neck and he was gazing northward, along and beyond the reach of his extended right arm.

His jaw was slack. The pupils of his eyes, which should have been contracted by the glare to merest pin-points, were dilated, distended widely as with superstitious awe. I looked in the compass quarter of his gaze.

Far to the north, formed by the diathermal and refractive qualities of the salt diamonds and hanging in the crystal air like some mighty, wavering but distinctly limned and colored canvas, was a mirage. I beheld in the sky a range of sandy hummocks across which, her rosy kimono caught up in one baby hand, the *samisen* outheld in the other, the sprig of pale yucca bells trembling in her high polished chignon of hair, was running, with those absurd little toed-in steps, the greatly exaggerated image of the fluffy kitten of a Japanese girl.

She appeared running toward us, the *samisen* outflung, her mouth open, tongue showing, and her little chubby face distraught. Abruptly, as I looked, she stumbled and sprawled full-length in the sand, the *samisen* tumbling over and over. I could see, magnified against the sky, the tiny spirals of dust clouds thrown up by the extended stiff fingers of her digging hands.

She lay in the crystalline film of the sky, a silky fallen carnation pinking the white sand. I could even make out the shower of blue wisteria on the shimmering gown. Then back of her, above the brush of the nearest hummock appeared a gigantic white hood with two long black slits and the glitter behind of eyes. The Hooded One, vast and shadowy like the ogre of a dream, looked down at the girl in the trough.

"Ah!" breathed Metztli, dropping his arms. "It is one of the scouts. This is a message from Tonatiuh himself to show us how well our men are watching."

With swift accession of sacerdotal subtlety, he swung round on the cob and faced the bucks as, guns and bronze skins glinting in the refracted dazzle, they rode up, two by two.

"Behold, *macehualli!*" he cried. "I have interpreted the sky-picture, the delphic drawing of the great Tonatiuh. It means more than any mere message to show how closely our scouts are pursuing. It signifies that the crusade of the Guiacuras is righteous, favored by the Sublime Sun God, propitious and well-timed.

"Observe, men. The yellow people, pictured in this tiny weak girl, shall flee with mouths open and in panic before the valor of the sons of Quetzalcoatl. Notice that our scout is drawn larger than life. That pays tribute to the might of the Nahuatlac tribe and signifies we must and will prevail.

"The sulfur-hued men shall throw away their weapons as this frail girl threw away her queer instrument, and they shall fall prostrate before us, even as she did in the sand. Now is the hour to strike. I, Metztli, the Moon, the Reflector of the Sun, say it!"

He turned round quickly, without chancing a glance at Mariquita or me; dug his walnut-brown heels into the heaving flanks of the bay, and swung off at a brisk canter, a little south of the westering sun, so that we should cut across only a segment of the brilliant sink. I jerked the reins to wheel my pony in behind him, the while my eyes still clung to that wavering crystalline canvas of the sky.

Everything was happening in an ace of time. I saw, doubly enlarged in the vaporous flicker, the clay-coated shoulders and limbs of the hooded scout rising slowly above the brush of the hummock. Then lo! come of the alteration of my position, the onward move of the pinto, a change was wrought for me in the refractions and with that swift treachery of nature's agencies the mirage vanished utterly.

All was cruel haloid white again. The hoofs of the horses made monstrous noise, as if they were crunching through a brittle crust. Looking about in the dazzle I could discern that the crystal were of the fine fibrous variety known as hair-salt, hard as glass, pellucid, glowing white with brilliant hearts like faculæ of the sun. Here and there were pale pink and yellow striates of sylvite, gypsum, selenite and anhydrite, gray as cinders. All were blazing together in one great concremation.

"WHAT do you think of the sun-picture?" I asked Mariquita, as the flaming nostrils of the Sable Star breathed hotly up to me. "Do you agree with Metztli's oracular conclusions?"

She shook her sombreroed head vigorously, for all the heat.

"No; not at all," she scoffed. "It looked to me as if the dainty little girl reflected in the mirage were greatly distressed and fleeing in abnormal fear. Her mouth was open and tongue lolling, as if she were winded and athirst. I thought for a trice she was lost in the desert. But the pursuing presence of the scout denied that supposition and showed plainly, I think,

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that she could not be so far from the Japanese encampment.

"Perhaps," she surmised, "the frail tiny one has been working too hard, carrying burdens too often from the Japanese schooner in the bight of bay, driven beyond the limit of her endurance by that saffron mouse-decorated priest. She fell heavily as though utterly exhausted. And she never stirred, once she fell. Have you reason, *señor*," she looked at me sharply, "to suspect what it is all about?"

"I saw her yesterday evening for the first time in my life," I answered. "As soon as she landed from the schooner, she dabbled her feet in the tepid water, playful as a kitten. Last night I heard her thrumming that stringed instrument she was carrying in the mirage, and singing in the high nasal tone so admired of the Japanese. It was just after the yellow coolie, who was driving me toward the encampment at the point of his knife, was killed down in the creosote clump by Quetzal.

"I went up a bald-topped hill," I continued, "to look down into the Japanese camp. I saw her then and heard her tinkling and singing in that weird kind of chant. All of a sudden the singing died away and I noticed she was slumped forward over the *samisen* and that her silken shoulders were shaking in the firelight, as if she were sobbing uncontrollably.

"The next instant I was captured there on the top of the mound by Quetzal and Ichcapilli. But it was that last view of the girl," I ended, "that appearance of deep slow sobbing, which causes me to think, now, there is something more to all this mirroring in the sky than any mere overwork or exhaustion."

"But what can it be, *caballerete?*"

"Precisely that is what I do not know. Yet I feel that your first ideas, Mariquita, were nearest the truth. I believe that this girl did desert the Japanese and flee into the wastes under the drive of some great fear. She is lost now, I think, and exhausted from running and tormenting thirst. What worries me is how to judge the presence of the hooded scout. Will he aid her from the bounty of his water-bottle, or will his masked appearance only the more force her on in utter distraction?"

"Perhaps it was his very appearance which caused her to flee," Mariquita returned. "But the poor little thing need have no such fear of our scout. The Guiacuras do not make war on women.

"I hardly think," she added, "that the scout has a gourd on his clay-coated person. The Guiacuras rarely cart water with them, as they know every spring and aqua-hole in the desert. But he may be able to carry her to the nearest well, or else convey water back to her in a *copita* he can readily mold from the clay on his shoulders. He will take fair care of her, you may rest assured, *señor*."

She said this rather archly, as if to subdue some more than ordinary anxiety I might have about the girl.

"Within half an hour," she concluded, "we shall be at the mesquite flat. Then shall we get the full report of all the scouts and know exactly what was betokened by the mirage. Meanwhile, we can do naught to aid and should be foolish to worry. It is all in the hands of God."

"In the meanwhile, Mariquita," I corrected, "you might explain a few loose ends of your unhappy history. How was it, for instance, you and Dicenta happened to come over here, to Lower California, instead of making on, as the good old *padre* advised, for Nogales in Arizona or south to Mazatlan? And why of all things did you suffer Dicenta to bury the chest in the sand, hail and board ship alone, and leave you behind to the mercy of the ghostly solitudes and lurking Indians?

"Another thing," I added quickly, as she made to explain. "Did you ever regain possession of the deeds to the ranch? According to what you said, Dicenta failed to turn them over to the priest, in all the flurry of planning and leaving. When you two left the *casa*, that rainy night he still retained them in the inside breast pocket of his uniform.

"Now, I never met Dicenta," I averred afresh. "He was arrested in San Francisco on the supposition that he was Lieutenant Adolfo Ramerez de Valencia, who was alleged to have absconded with over one hundred thousand dollars in newly minted Mexican gold. Of course we know now that poor Valencia never embezzled the money; he was the unfortunate paymaster who was killed by the Colorados; and his chest of hidalgos and medio hidalgos is the very one that my expedition dug up out of the sand.

"Dicenta, you see, jumped the bond furnished partly by Kit Morley but mostly by me and between two days disappeared absolutely. But I remember Morley telling me that Dicenta had confided to him that he never stole the gold, that he had really secured it through the selling of a ranch to a Japanese merchant—the very ranch, by the way, that belonged to you and your fathers, the Hacienda del Cazadero. Dicenta sought to show that his appearance with the tin dispatch-box full of new gold coins, at the very moment of the stir over the vanishing of so much money from the Mexican mint, had unhappily combined to put him in wrong. He was the victim of circumstances, he pleaded, the butt of pure hard luck."

Mariquita smiled a rosy but dry smile.

That's very like the story he strove to force me to believe," she said, "in order to account for the disappearance of the deeds. Of course, there were variations and digressions, as his fears lessened and strength came to his hand.

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That last night in the gusty trough of the hills, sitting in the rustling dark among the blacker shapes of the ruins of the old mission, the truth finally outcropped. He had won and no longer was afraid of me.

"But my soul!" she exclaimed. "What a hodgepodge I am making of it all! *Señor*, there isn't a deal more to tell," she added, "but what little there is should explain fully I trust all your doubts and gropings."

Then, as we cantered over the brilliant crumbling haloid minerals, into the brassy concavity of sky, she finished her story.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LEATHER PUTTEES

SHORTLY after Dicenta and Mariquita with the laden sumpter-horse between them had headed over the jungled mountains, the rain ceased as abruptly as it had started. But for hours later, as they hurried through the night and the pitch-black tunnel of tropical forest, the foliage dripped mournful accompaniment to the squash of hoofs in the sodden, decayed vegetation underfoot.

Not indeed till she had ridden late into the following day did the girl recover sufficiently from dread of pursuit and fear of her escort to remember the various deeds to the *ranchería* which the priest, in his sharp anxiety for her, had failed to secure from Dicenta. Then, in calling voice, she questioned the man ahead.

Dicenta gave her, thereupon, much the same reasoning he was later to use in San Francisco. He had not exactly sold the *hacienda* for the chest of gold they were even then conveying, but he had deposited the deeds with the Japanese merchant as a pledge for the safety of the gold. He no longer possessed the documents.

"How otherwise, *mi señorita*," he asked, "could I gain such control of the trunk as to be able to remove it from the hands of the Japanese up into the vault of your fathers? That Japanese is, I tell you, a very leech for gold. He would not allow me to take the chest until I had left with him, as security, all the deeds and letters patent to the *estancia*.

"My four Colorados were witness to the transaction. But they didn't know, the dullards, that even had not the good *padre* compelled me so to do, I intended to run off with the trunk and you, my little one, this very night. It is to laugh, Mariquita *mia*. Father Pio played right into these hands!"

The chuckled boast sounded most incongruous amid the man's evident fears of pursuit and sullen respect for her aim and trigger-quickness. Dicenta was continually peering about, behind and to either side. She readily perceived that this sudden blustering attitude was but an arduous effort on his part to regain his own respect for his cleverness and lift himself in her eyes from any appearance of cowering submission.

They were dropping down the jungled declivities at the time. Overhead was an intricately wattled roof of green, through which the sun-rays barely filtered. The trail beneath wound in and out, tessellated with broken beams, dusky as twilight. To either hand, upholding the latticed roof and smothered beneath creepers and waxy orchids, the mighty boles of mahogany, lignum-vitæ and yellow cedar stretched away in marshaled files, like the dim festooned columns of some decadent temple.

Uncouth ant-bears and proboscidal tapirs, like dwarfed strays out of the age of mammoths, walked clumsily and in odd silence through the shady depths; sloths clung inverted to limbs and lianas like gray nests; and long-nosed monkeys twinkled tiny eyes and swung heavily as if tired. From far off came, remotely, the continuous murmur of the turbulent Rio del Fuerte. Ahead and without sound, dun little birds flitted about the frescade. Underfoot, in the mold of fallen leaves and vegetable rot, the horses' hoofs made but feeble noise. It was all unreal and eery, heavy with languor, constrained in queer silence, like the drowsy imagining of some sluggish fever.

Come of the oppressiveness, the girl was quick to sense that there was more to Dicenta's chuckling boast than any mere attempt to save his face. The blatant bragging was like the whistle of a frightened person in a spooky house—a vent to unwholesome qualms, a show of bravery where bravery was not, an ineffective endeavor to bolster up infirm and wavering bravado. The hothouse closeness of the jungle, the sense of veiled watching by noiseless creatures, were bearing down the man's soul, quickening his brain with weird flutterings.

They camped that night on the side of a dingle, overgrown with lush, where the chilly trickle of a mountain burnlet made the only sound in a dead world. They built a smoky fire. Then Mariquita removed her knee-boots and wrapped herself in the *serape* for a wink of sleep, a Colt beneath the rubber folds and ready in her hand.

She intended only to doze and stretch her cramped limbs, keeping one eye rigidly open. But she had not closed an eye in sleep for two nights. She must have completely lost consciousness, therefore, when a disturbance, the heavy border of the serape brushing her chin levered wide her lids. In the feeble glimmer of the dying fire, she saw Dicenta bending over her.

Instantly she comprehended what he was about. He was attempting because of his fears to sneak one of her guns. She flung off the

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poncho, leaped afoot in stockinged feet, and menaced him with the weapon that had reposed all along in her hand. For the rest of the night she lay stark awake and tense. Morning found her more exhausted than ever she had been the night prior.

Through the next day the man sought strenuously to eradicate the impression left by his cowardly try. But his very attempt to gain the upper-hand had filled her mind with engrossing plan and she hardly noticed him. She would tear a leaf from his book of duplicity she determined—trick the tricky one.

That night she dozed and waited to hear him breathe deep and regularly; but with utter exhaustion sleep finally overcame all her staunch efforts and only the chill of dawn awakened her. She lifted up upon an elbow then, and most quietly. Dicenta still sprawled supine, one arm beneath blond head, on the other side of the gray heap of ashes.

Noiseless as a creature of the wilds she got afoot and crossed over to him. She leaned down. With fingers light and sensitive as the legs of a fly, she felt the flaps and pockets of his uniform. There was no bulge or dry crackle of concealed papers.

He opened his eyes slowly as she straightened up. There was in those pale blue eyes a taunting glimmer.

"I am glad," he said, "that the *señorita* has satisfied herself. She will believe now, I hope, that I have not the deeds and letters patent."

It mystified and greatly perturbed Mariquita. What could he have done with the records? She discredited entirely his asseverations, stoutly maintained and oft repeated, that he had turned them all over to the Japanese *comerciante* as surety for the gold. Had he not reached toward his inside breast pocket when the priest demanded the deeds? She had left him only for a trice to change into her riding clothes. Where in that time could he have hidden the documents? She felt certain he still had them upon his person.

She noticed that morning what she had remarked before, but thought nothing of. Now suspicions sharpened her eyes, lent dramatic meaning to the regular happening.

EVERY evening of the journey, as he prepared for sleep, Dicenta removed his shoes; but never once did he doff the leather puttees about his calves and ankles. He loosened the leggings of course, to allow of the removal of the boots; but immediately afterward and tightly, he rebuckled them.

Nature provides during the interim of sleep for a certain restful expansion of limbs and muscles. Dicenta's practise of cinching and wearing the puttees through the night was most painfully stricturing to the fibulæ and great tibial nerves, arteries and bones of the legs. In the morning when he donned his shoes he always limped about brittle-legged. He must have cogent reason, surely, for thus mortifying himself.

Mariquita was certain with a positive certitude that there, plastered about his calves, lining the puttees, were the deeds concealed. She made up her mind to attempt, surreptitiously and that very night, the removal of one of those puttees.

They had not been under way an hour when all at once they broke out upon a clearing, lost in the welter of jungle. The stucco was crumbling in huge gobs from the deserted *residencia;* the granary though empty of everything but rats, was bulging four ways with the warping process of the hot moist air; and both house and barn were overgrown and interlaced in a maze of lianas, liverworts, moth-flowers and other morbid fecund growths.

A breed girl fled frantically into a tumble-down lean-to built of twisted boards pilfered from the barn. As distractedly but with far more ado, a pig lumbered, squealing, from burrowing under a banana tree. With the odd sensation of feeling themselves ghost-riders who frightened poor people to cover, Mariquita and Dicenta rode on.

A little below, they came upon the branch road that penetrated the uplands and, paralleling the Rio del Fuerte, connected with the Southern Pacific at Macochin. But they knew better than to await the coming of any train. Purple thorn-apples and spike grass were growing lushly in the ballast gravel; the rails were brown with corroding rust; and even the ties were splintering away under the boring of myriad ants.

It was here however that they opened the small army trunk with the aid of the key suspended around Dicenta's neck. They removed a handful of golden hidalgos in preparation for defraying the cost of the contemplated railroad journey to be undertaken below at Macochin. They would entrain north or south, whichever direction the first arriving passenger happened to be heading. It was all one with them, as much a gamble anyway as if dependent on the cast of a die.

But when they reached Macochin, squatting beside the Rio del Fuerte and straggling to either side of the railroad, they found the pretentious station razed to its wide foundations and the tracks wrenched from the ground as by a seismic shock, the rails upended, twisted and glinting in the sun like the gruesome remains of pre-glacial and malignant reptiles.

They decided perforce to swing off from the Rio del Fuerte and head a little south for the nearest large port, Topolobampo on the Gulf of California, where they might gain passage on some ship. Dicenta's fears had waxed rather than waned as they penetrated down into the

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more populous hot lands of the coast. They would take ship, he vowed, to San José in Guatemala, Acajutla in Salvador, Panama, South America, anywhere, to get out of this land of hounding fears.

There proved to be a three-masted barkentine in the bay from the French copper mines about Santa Rosalia in Lower California across the gulf. It had been rumored that a consignment, routed over the Southern Pacific, had been stalled hereabouts and the captain had sailed in to investigate.

On the account of the fact that no trains, and hence no freight of any kind, were reaching Topolobampo, he was going back in ballast. He proved eager enough to help lighten a bit of the expenses of the fruitless trip by booking the two, with their portmanteau and chest of gold, as passengers.

They were to sail the following morning. That night instead of determining what was hidden beneath Dicenta's puttees, Mariquita enjoyed an unbroken rest amid the clean linen of one of the bark's staterooms.

CHAPTER XXIX

TO KILL A MAN

THE girl had hesitated, to be sure, over the idea of sailing to Lower California, where there was little else then sierras and sand; but Dicenta had proved deaf to all reasoning. Now that escape was almost at hand, he was frantic to grasp it. He could not wait he said for a ship making passage to the States or South America. By hook or crook, in steamer or windjammer, somehow he must rid his heels forever of Mexico, no matter where he brought up.

The fears of days had grown into a fine frenzy. It was not important he insisted, that Baja California was still part and parcel of Mexico. It was not the mainland, at least, where there were pursuing Colorados and ubiquitous Carranzistas. Come to think of it, Lower California was really a separate domain, the province of one Estaban Cantu, erstwhile captain in the Mexican army, now virtual king of the whole spit of land. There were a poor few *rurales*, of course, but they never got much farther south than the tempting gaming-tables of Tia Juana and Mexicali on the border.

Altogether to divert suspicion from the heavy trunk and render plain the source of their money, Dicenta sold the three horses in Topolobampo and announced pointedly to the captain that only through the fortunate sale was he enabled to pay their fares.

The master of the bark was a little whiskered peanut of a Frenchman, toasted to the color of *café au lait* and with something of the sea in his eyes, the sparkle of the sun on blue water. He looked overside to where two brawny wide-legged sailors were having all they could do to carry the army chest up the gangway.

"Well," he remarked significantly, "for one so poor, *monsieur* the lieutenant comes heavily burdened. One might think you were lugging the steel molds of a whole army in that trunk, so heavy it is."

"It contains the silver service, *señor*, some ceramics and a few valuable rugs from my commandant's burned *residencia*. It was these wolfish Colorados that burned my poor commandant's *casa* to the ground. Please have those sailors handle the chest with care, *señor*. There are also in that trunk some treasured books of the wife of the commandant."

"It is too bad, surely, the shape of affairs on the mainland," returned the skipper, his blue sparkling eyes seeking the supposed wife of the commandant, who stood near the lee rail and who was none other than Mariquita.

"But your commander's wife there looks well enough able to take care of herself. *Ma foi*, she's one of the new women, eh? Carries all the family arsenal, while *monsieur*, though a soldier, goes empty-handed."

"*Señor el capitan*," answered Dicenta, pale but glib, "if your wife could spin the wheel, tack and wear and altogether guide this clipper better than you, she would be the master, eh? And wear the little gold-braided cap, no? It is that way with the wife of my commandant.

"I am only her escort till she gets altogether out of this infernal country; she hardly needs me, for soldier though I am, she is a better marksman than ever I can hope to be. She can shoot out the eyes of a gnat, if you will believe me, *señor*, at twenty paces!"

The conversation evidenced the suspicions of the captain and gnawingly worried Dicenta. The following morning the corners of his pale eyes were mottled with blood as if he had passed a sleepless, tormented night. Up and down the deck like a caged animal, he paced, as the bark gathered way and trimming to the off-shore breeze, heeled out of the bay. Every so often he would look aft to where, on the poop-deck under the taut fore-and-aft mizzen sheet, the skipper strode the windward side. He would shake his head, each time, and murmur:

"*Locas y niños dicen la verdad*. Fools and children speak the truth and that frog-eating captain is both fool and child!"

He dreaded the gossip that the wagging tongue of the skipper might loosen in the little port of Santa Rosalia. When they hauled into Aqua Verde Bay across the gulf and took cross-bearings of Punta San Marcia and Catalina Island, preparatory to piloting up the coast of Baja California, he swung up the break of the poop and requested the master to land him on the finger of land protruding into the green bay.

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"But *monsieur,*" objected the captain, showing swift vexation, "I thought your sailing directions were to make Santa Rosalia and from there sign on some other craft out of the gulf. What has come to windward of you?"

"Nothing, *señor el capitan;* only I have changed my plans."

"*Mon Dieu,* the lieutenant is like a very wind with his changes!" exclaimed the skipper acidulously. "But really, *monsieur,*" he added more calmly, "there is only a fisher village of Digger Indians on that point and back of it in a trough of the sierras, a ruined mission of the Padres."

But even as he had proved with Mariquita when he booked passage on the clipper, so now Dicenta was insistently obdurate. The girl, to fulfill her unsolicited role and refrain from adding to the already sharpening suspicions, could say little and that little only in corroboration of Dicenta's persistent demand.

Finally, with a Gallic shrug of the shoulders and a calling upon blue devils to witness there was no understanding these two, the febrile little skipper yielded. Putting over the ship's yawl, in two trips he ferried ashore Mariquita and Dicenta and their suitcase and chest of gold.

In the fishing village of San Marcia, the two quickly learned that mighty few ships were cutting the blue gulf these troublous days and that, if ever they hoped to get north or south to mainland on either side of Mexico, the best thing they possibly could do would be to head through the near-by pass in the sierras for the opposite coast. There, on the shores of the Pacific, said the fisher folk, all manner of ships were plying the ocean lanes from east to west coast through the Canal.

They purchased three mules of the villagers, one as a pack-animal. The fall of evening found them camped among the shadowy thorn-panicled adobes of the ruined mission, in the gusty depths of the pass, where the distant yipping of coyotes dropped down like the whimpering of chilled puppies.

That night was the first opportunity given Mariquita to ascertain what was concealed beneath those puttees of Dicenta. She dozed fitfully and listened to hear the deep regular suspiration of the man. Certain at last that he slept, she got afoot and picking her way among the crumbling thorn-spiked bowlders, noiseless as a creature of the wilds, crossed to his side.

IT WAS pitchy dark in the gully and noisy with the rustling of the brambles in the uncertain gusts. She held her nervousness between her teeth, leaned down and, with lightning fingers, lifted the drop-pin of one buckle and pulled out the thong of leather. In all the shivery rustling, that leather thong seemed to make a loud noise against the rolling pin, monstrous as the rattle of a tumbling stone.

Dicenta's lids fluttered wide. He leaped to his feet, his face livid in the dark.

She leveled one of the Colt's at him. The blood was pounding in her ears, pulsing violently in her lips.

"Take off that legging!" she commanded.

He slumped down in the sedge grass as if his legs had turned to the consistency of water. But he made no hurried move to unbuckle the leather about calf and ankle. He looked up at her oddly, his face still white as a wood-grub's but his eyes glittering in the dark like the eyes of a cat.

"Mariquita *mia,*" he said in a voice that he meant to be steady but which, despite all his efforts at control, trembled slightly, "did you ever kill a man? Did you ever see a man sitting down, talking and pleading for his life, as I am doing now; did you ever press that little trigger of your gun, and see him then, not an instant later, a thing of clammy putty, mouth open, jaw sagging, eyes staring starkly and brains spattered about like worms?

"It is horrible, yes. But go ahead, *señorita,* kill me like that in cold blood. I refuse to take off the legging. You may remove it yourself, Mariquita, when you have murdered me. Now, shoot!"

It was a crisis; a crisis that had sprung up in an indivisible point of time; a crisis for which she was utterly unprepared. She might have perceived it brewing in the last few days; but her mind had been so fluttered by misgivings and excitements that she had not the use of her normal perspicacity. Dicenta had pushed matters in the last few days toward this issue.

In securing passage aboard the barkentine, he had carried his way, armed though she was with two Colt's and much sound reasoning. He had saddled her then with an undesired rôle—that of the wife of some nameless army officer—and had stripped her, by so doing, of all power to wield the whip-hand, stilling her tongue, forcing her to echo his wishes, molding her like soft dough in his tricky hands.

He had hastened, most unreasonably, their departure from the ship off Point San Marcia and, of necessity, so was she postured, she had been compelled to corroborate his hectic demand. It was he and his frantic fears alone that had driven them, slinking and furtive, up into these wild gusty sierras.

He was indeed a warped soul, destined to duplicity, forever spinning his web like a spider toward some hidden, entangling, decisive nucleus. He was showing his hand now, because at last they were clear of the mainland and reasonably safe from the presence of ubiquitous Carranzistas, the hounding of lusting Colorados.

He had forced matters to this focus, this

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extremity, with evil prepense. He wanted to upset the balance and decide once and for all who should rule and who obey. Was she to truckle, to cringe from her duty to herself and, thenceforth, submit to this man like a thrall?

"Go ahead, my little one," he insisted, his voice controlled by now, but vibrating sibilantly. "Kill a man. Taste how it feels. I know. I have seen my dead and never shall I forget the horror. It pursues like a nightmare, Mariquita, every least aspect of the slain—the uncanny glimmer of glassy eyes, the viscous threads at the corners of the mouth! Prayers avail not. The very Virgin congeals to ice. And one never forgets, never forgets! But go ahead my little one. Shoot me, even as I warn you. Murder me! I'll stop talking, then, forever."

She closed her eyes. Duty bade her to shoot; but no impulse traveled along the nerves of her arm to tense, ever so little, that hair-fine trigger which would spit forth instant death. Within her, two selves were at grapples.

There in the dark gusty trough of the hills, as she stood with lids rigidly closed, the Colt faintly glittering in her stiffly bent arm, the man seated before her, white and sibilating, in the grass, a struggle was waged within her for supremacy, for the life or the death of the man.

Inside her brain, a cold reasoning self insisted icily:

"You must, you must! He is a snake in the grass. He has forced it all to this crisis. You cannot weaken. You must shoot. It is a duty to yourself, your womanhood. You must kill, or hereafter obey like a slave!"

"No no!" shuddered her other self, her emotional self, her conscience and her heart and all the fine delicate unstrung tissue of her which one calls femininity. "He is treacherous, true; but he is flesh and blood, one of God's own creatures the same as you. You cannot snuff out his life in cold calculation. It would be hideous, abysmal. Heart of God, it would be murder!"

The struggle was purely spiritual, yet it was more harrowing than any mere physical strife. It was a terrific tussle between emotion on one hand and sane reason on the other, between all her fine tender frail susceptibilities and the protesting knowledge and experience of the man's innate vileness. The blood sucked from her face and lips into the pounding artery of her heart; the lids were torn back and her eyes distended by the sheer horror of her thoughts; and she shuddered and shuddered with the ripping and smashing of all her struggling delicate fabric.

She wanted to shoot, if only to wound. But she could not shoot. Her will, strained to the breaking point, snapped; and, dizzied and aghast, terrified by her own weakness, she dropped the useless weapon, slumped down after it, buried her head in her arms and sobbed incontinently, as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER XXX

VEILED WATCHING

THE man had won. Forsooth, never would he have chanced such a delicate crisis had he not felt certain all along that he would win. He reached over. With brazen effrontery, he shoved aside one of her boots to grasp in his hand the fallen Colt.

Lightning-swift he was behind her, then; had snapped open the flap of the other holster, possessed himself of the second weapon and was back once again to his former position in the grass. There, while the brambles rustled in the gusty dark and the disarmed girl shook through and through with sobs, he waited, toying grimly with the guns.

"Mariquita," he spoke at last, "things are as they should be now. No longer will I be the butt of sailors' jeers."

She looked up sharply, with the swift sense that something untoward had happened. She felt for her weapons and,even as she determined they were gone, glimpsed them, blacker than the dark, in his hands. Her voice lumped in her throat. She wet her trembling white lips. At last, each word a wrench, she gasped—

"What—are you going to do—now—to me?" Her eyes were frigid pools in the marble of her face.

"Oh, nothing, my little one, never fear," he assured her airily. "I will protect you, even as the good *padre* advised, and see that we both win through safely. But mine shall be the man's part from now on. I will be the leader and guardian of this little portage.

"Things are as they should be, Mariquita," he repeated, more seriously. "You are once more the dependent female and I the shielding male. And look you, *chiquita*, we are fairly even besides. You have the chest of gold and I the deeds to the *hacienda*. Oh, yes; they are wrapped around my legs beneath the puttees! I don't mind telling you that now. But I am beastly tired of having to keep the stiff leathers so tightly and continually strapped. I will carry the documents henceforth in my breast pocket."

He paused, as if to smile into the uneasy dark. From far off came the soaring, thin, fiercely sad howl of a coyote, sounding his woe to the remote stars.

"No," Dicenta went on, "I do not fear any longer that the papers will be stolen. It is like this, Mariquita *mia*. I do not want the chest of gold. It is a nemesis, a hounding plague to me. The suspicions of that French clipper captain showed me that. You shall keep the trunk and I the deeds. Is it not fair, *señorita*?"

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"But I must," she quavered—"I must return the documents as payment for the stolen gold. Padre Pio——"

"Listen, my little one," he returned with lofty gentleness, like one who though irritated forbore through pity from rebuke. "I have a plan. You and I shall hail some northbound ship, once we get to the Pacific, and sail in all probability to San Francisco.

"But it would arouse suspicion, leave a plain and connected track, and might even lead to the continuation of our pursuit, should we carry aboard that heavy trunk. The sarcasm of the frog-eating skipper bore plain evidence to that effect. I have no desire, I tell you, to cart along with me my own death-warrant.

"What do we do, then, eh? Nothing simpler, Mariquita *mia*. We will bury the trunk of golden hidalgos beneath several feet of sand. Then when we finally fetch San Francisco, we will outfit our own craft, select carefully our own men and sail back here for the gold. When at last we have the money safe and banked in some substantial American depository, then and not before, will we return to Venustiano Carranza the papers entitling him to your *estancia*."

Strangely enough, Dicenta proved as good as his word. He molested the girl not a whit. It was unexpected, to say the least, and inexplicable, altogether out of jibe with his natural predisposition to treachery. Oppressing fear, she knew, or else some motive underlying but potent, was gloving his hand.

Perhaps it was fear of the long arm of Father Pio Abogado. Or it may have been the sense of veiled watching by those lurking presences, unseen but ever felt; those presences, intangible and vague as in a dream, yet which they knew were there, everywhere about them, slinking tireless and furtive as animals through the gullies of the hills and the troughs of the dunes.

Or again it may have come through a simple desire to win at last the girl as an ally. Perhaps he feared that the need might arise, in some future time, when the girl could untangle for him some snarl in his elaborate mesh.

Either way, Mariquita was nervous and sleepless, gnawed by her defenselessness and by the proposed plan. Long before the desert hove in sight, to sear her eyes like a blinding caustic, she had made up her mind never to accompany him aboard another ship.

She feared the natural treachery of the man, his perverted propensity toward evil. Would it not be like him to double-cross her in San Francisco, returning alone for the treasure? Would it not be like him, again, never to relinquish the deeds, but to retain them and squat on her land, once affairs had settled in Mexico?

And to think of placing herself once more in his hands, aboard his own craft, among a crew he personally selected and who would be of a piece with himself, beyond a doubt, just like his former *compadres* of the Colorados! Ah, no; never again would she trust herself to the mercy of Serafin Dicenta!

But she held her tongue. She felt that the promise given, to take her north with him aboard some passing ship, was cogently instilling the man with caution, sheathing his fangs, causing him to fear to bother her lest he should add to the sum of the many crimes that were hounding him.

THEY reached, finally, the salt-sink sloping away behind the sage-brush-coated ridge thrown up by the Trades off the Pacific. What with the ridge, the pale dazzling pink of gypsum veining the sides and the general haloid concavity among all the sand, it was an unmistakable landmark. They decided, here, to bury the gold chest.

She opened the portmanteau on one side of the sumpter-mule and removed the tin dispatch-box. It was empty of course of documents. She removed the little salt sack containing the few gold pieces and leathern bag of jewels, replacing it in the suitcase. Then using the metal-edged box as a spade, their sombreros as shovels to fling aside the crystals, they dug a hole and buried the weighty trunk.

Dicenta had marked off the spot in the geometrical center of the depression, by measuring with pacing feet from each quarter of the rim of sand. He drew a map of the sink, stating the exact number of steps the burial-plot was from each cardinal-point of the circling sides. Then walking beside the slow-footed mules, he set off into the eye of the sun, due west, keeping tab of his steps until he topped the ridge of dunes that looked down upon the spit of land, enclosing the bight of bay. The distance in feet, from salt-sink to bight, he marked also in the map.

The unfurrowed blue sheet of bay, the solemnity of desolation that was Magdalena, struck them like a blow. Instead of the wide Pacific with its traversing travel, they found themselves in a landlocked harbor, with Santa Margarita Island blocking the horizon to the south, volcanic rugged headlands jutting down from the north, and not a ship nor feather of smoke to be seen.

"We shall have to head north around the bay till we can sight the Pacific," determined Dicenta. "And it is well, my little one. This *pasear* will aid to conceal the location of our treasure and further obliterate our tracks. It favors our plans to a desire."

"But I will stay behind, Serafin, to guard the burial-ground," she thereupon announced. "When you return for the gold, then can I sail for San Francisco, glorying in the thought that never again shall I see this terrible desert."

"But the Indians, Mariquita!" he sought to

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persuade her. "Those presences we feel everywhere about. They must be Indians, lurking and hounding us and for no good purpose you can wager my little one."

It was on the tip of her tongue to retort that compared to her inherent loathing of him, she far preferred the intangible presence of the Indians, hostile though they might later prove to be. But, instead and diplomatically, she suffered herself to be induced to accompany him onward in the northerly circling of the bay.

Gulls lifted from the rocks of the still lagoons and flew before them and overhead, their great wings spread sidelong to the wind, their red beaks cawing raucously. The pound of the Pacific on the distant strand was an incessant murmur in their ears. They came at last within sight of the surf and the immensity of blue beyond, stretching limpid and seemingly in a convex before them.

Through the pellucidity of the following morning, they made out a tiny white packet, close-hove to the land, its topsails lifted to catch the hot capricious offshore airs. Pinnacling himself atop a dune, frantically waving his sombrero and aided by the clearness of the morning, Dicenta succeeded in hailing the sloop. It stood in a bit, then a small boat could be seen dropping overside.

Mariquita was adamantine in her determination to stay behind. She relinquished into Dicenta's hands the tin dispatch-box which they had filled with golden hidalgos and half hidalgos ere burying the chest in the salt-sink. The money was to be used expressly as a fund to outfit the returning expedition. She only begged him to leave with her the two Colt's.

"Here they are!" he cried, as his feet flinging up sand, he leaped over the dune behind which with the mules she hid. "Use them with my best regards, Mariquita *mia*, on your invisible *compañeros!*"

"Go thou with God!" she returned, then added with sharp thought: "If ever the good *Dios* would trust Himself to such companionship!"

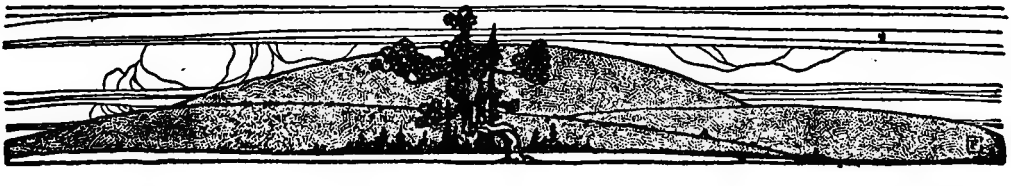
She remained crouched and concealed in the trough while the small boat from the sloop raced through the curling surf. It was her plan to hail the next ship passing within eye-shot, relate a story of buried treasure, lead the crew to the salt-sink and there unearth and recover the trunk. Then, with the gold in her possession, she would be placed once more in a position to dictate terms to Dicenta and make certain that the deeds were rightfully returned to the Mexican government.

DURING the next few days, several ships cleaved the blue, making north and south; but so far off they were, she could only pick up their streamers of smoke or the flash, in the sunlight, of their white sails. Of course, distractedly in either hand she waved sombrero and kerchief, but it was only to the sad blasting of her hopes. Dicenta had had the usual luck of the devil's own, she began to realize, in the ease with which he had attracted the attention of the passing sloop.

She grew discouraged and physically weak from the lack of nourishment contained in the mesquite beans that she crushed, patted and baked into wan tortillas. She had barely strength enough left to remove the suitcase from the pack-mule and allow him to wander off after his fellows.

But with a desperate accession of courage, she was gathering mesquite branches for a huge beacon to burn through the nights when all of a sudden the Guiacuras disclosed themselves in white hoods and clay coats, surrounded and captured her, and brought her a prisoner to the box cañon of the Seven Springs where I had found her.

TO BE CONCLUDED



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FORTY-FOUR AND THE LIMB OF SATAN

Arthur Schwieder

by Ruby Erwin Livingston

Author of "The Luck of Forty-four"

THE MORNING sun shining through the window of the cabin roused Joshua George Washington Dawson from an exciting dream. He did not want to wake up, for he was just raking in a pile of small change, the winnings of a successful crap-game. He rolled over and prepared to snore on when the heavy thud of an iron in the adjoining room, followed by a musical voice, completed the waking process.

He groaned and, sitting on the edge of the bed, reached for a number eleven shoe. The beautiful dream vanished into stern reality. Every bone in him was aching, for his late hours the night before were telling on him, and what was worse to him he had lost in the game. He was broke.

"Umph! Ain't so young as I oncet wuz," he grunted as he drew on the shoe.

"Now ef I jest had a little nip o' bitters or somep'n lak dat—I jest cyan't see why dem white folks done wants pro-hi-bishum."

If he only had a dollar he had an idea—oh, a very faint idea—where he might quench his thirst. His buxom wife continued to iron industriously, singing as she worked:

"Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' foh to carry me home——"

But the melody was lost on her spouse, for he was thinking not of the song but the money that the ironing would bring. He remembered, too, carrying home a huge basketful of clothes the evening before, collecting two dollars and turning it over to Lucretia without holding out so much as a penny. He surely ought to be allowed something as head of the house. He finished dressing hastily and shuffled in to greet Lucretia.

"Honey," he drawled sleepily, "is yo' got a dollah yo' can lemme have?"

The question was ill-timed. Any married man ought to know better than to ask a favor when he is late to breakfast.

Lucretia snorted. She had little patience with her husband's crap-shooting anyway, and he was getting too lazy to help keep up her farm.

"Dollah nothin'! Come a-walkin' out heah at nine o'clock, wantin' breakfas' an' a dollah too. An' yo' ain't gwine to git neideh one, lessen yo' git it yo'self. An' I doan' want no coffee slopped on dese clo'es, I tell yo'."

"Wal, yo' needn't git so rambunctious about a li'l matteh of a dollah," replied Joshua George Washington Dawson, otherwise known as "Forty-Four."

He poured a cup of coffee from the pot on the back of the stove, dished up a bit of corn pone and bacon and decided that for the safety of all concerned he had better eat from the little cook-table.

Lucretia sniffed.

"Rambunctious nothin', you cantankerous niggah! I got a right to be when yo' stays out all night, won't git up when I calls yo', den has de auderacity to 'sturb my tranquibility by axin' me foh a dollah when yo' done los' de one I gib yo' in de crap game. Yo's eben got too lazy to 'tend dat patch o' corn. Now yo'

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git out an' git a job an' make yo' dollah same as I does."

Forty-Four had an idea that it would be better to evacuate the present occupied territory, so he gulped his coffee hastily and began what the military call a "strategic retreat." He took a rifle from the wall, seated himself outside in the shade and pretended to be vigorously cleaning it.

"Ain't no use to argufy wid her. She knows more big words dan I does, an' bein' a woman she c'n say 'em faster," he mumbled, shaking his head.

His task soon gave out and his thoughts recurred to the corn patch. He knew it needed working, but the lull of May was in the air and the fragrance of the apple-blossoms invited him to dreams. He did not want to work; surely there was some way out of it. Returning to the cabin, he hung the rifle in its place and asked politely—

"Any clo'es yo' want toted home, Creshy?"

"Ef dey is, I c'n tote 'em home myse'f—an' I c'n c'lect foh 'em too," she sent back, and slammed the iron for emphasis.

Forty-Four vanished. Clearly there was no way out of it. It was work or fight, and he was by nature a pacifist. There was no giving up to this attack of Spring fever which possessed him. He was not by himself in his affliction; every Southerner has it to fight in the month of May, when the sky is the bluest, the air the balmiest, the trout leaps in the bayou, and from the trees the mocking-bird is calling, calling——

"I b'lieve I c'n git a job down to Kunnel Yancey's; his lawn's a sight an' de shrub'ry needs trimmin'. I won't go home to dinneh neideh, jest to show dat woman how to 'preciate me when I does come," he muttered.

He knew the colonel but slightly, having lived a very quiet life since his appearance in the little town five years gone. It was to his interest to see that people in general took little notice of him, since he was not anxious to return to the penitentiary to finish a life term. As long as he kept quiet there was small chance of the unobtrusive George Washington Dawson being recognized as the wanted Forty-Four. Unlike the man whose name he appropriated, he could lie glibly and gave satisfactory answers to the few questions regarding his past.

COMING into the broad lane, he paused long enough to seize a stone and hurl it at a timid-looking black cat, causing it to scamper in the opposite direction while the big black man watched it, commenting audibly:

"Go on, Misteh Black Cat—yo' doan bring me no bad luck today. I's got all mornin' an' I's gwine plum' roun' yo' path." And he made a wide circuit, adding, "I b'lieve, now, I's sho' gwine to git a job wid de kunnel."

The "kunnel's" broad acres stretched from the edge of the little town down to the river, and the old mansion looked as if it "didn't know the war was over." Here abode Colonel David Yancey, his worthy wife, his lovely daughter Doris, and Gilbert, a handsome youth of nineteen. The latter's escapades were already causing some of the older heads to wonder what the colonel was going to do with that boy, but if it ever worried his father he never spoke of it. Gilbert's latest sensation was to be expelled from college, and he was now at home, seated beside his father on a little portico at the side of the house. Toward this spot Forty-Four made his way and bowed gracefully, hat in hand.

" 'Scuse me, sah, Kunnel Yancey, but I's called to see if yo' can gimme some sort of a job."

The colonel looked at the big, smiling fellow and asked:

"Are you Creshy's husband? And what can you do?"

Forty-Four's smile broadened to a grin.

"Yas, sah, I's Creshy's husban'; yas, sah. I ain't very well requainted wid yo'—sold yo' some watehmillons a time or two, sah. I thought I might boss yo' cotton-hoein', sah."

The colonel quickly repressed a smile as he answered—

"I usually do that myself."

" 'Scuse me, den. Maybe you's lemme mow de lawn. I'm a monst'ous good hand trimmin' shrub'ry an' dat grass is growin' mighty fas'. I'd lak jest a job foh today, ef yo' ain't got nothin' else."

"Very well, you may see what you can do for the lawn; you'll find the mower and tools in that shed yonder."

"All right, sah, thanky. I'll do my best, sah," and Forty-four hastened to his task.

"Dad," drawled Gilbert, "I've got a hunch you'd like that darky. He's got a sort of takin' way with him that would make a good boss."

Colonel Yancey looked at his son askance. He wondered if Gilbert was making the suggestion in order to dodge the job of overseer himself, for he was considering putting the boy at the task. But Gilbert's face told nothing save a casual interest, and apparently forgetting his remark he rose and sauntered away before Forty-four returned. The employer gave a few orders and then slyly watched his new employee's lithe, quick movements as he plied sickle, blade and pruning-shears.

"The new broom is making a clean sweep for effect," mused the old gentleman, but he soon discovered that Forty-Four was oblivious to his surroundings. He talked to himself and sang in a low, crooning voice, as only a Dixie negro can sing; now improvising a river chantey, now trilling an old jubilee hymn, till the colonel decided:

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"Why, it's a pleasuah to have that darky around. Guess I'll get him up sev'al odd jobs."

He rose and called to Forty-Four:

"Say, Dawson, or George, whatever it is, come here and cut along the edge of the portico, while I think of it. Trim it up good so the sun can get to it—it's too damp and dark under here to be healthful."

"Yas, sah, dat's 'zackly right; an' ef I's you I'd cut dem two li'l maples out too. Dey'll grow up an' rot yo' roof, an' yo' doan' need 'em 'tall. Now I'll cut roun' dis heah crimson rambleh, lak dis."

He went down on his knees in the grass, then sprang back.

"Somep'n scratch—Gawd! He done got me!" And Forty-Four popped one wrist in his mouth, whacking vigorously all the while with the blade in the other hand.

"What the devil is it, man?" demanded the colonel.

Still Forty-Four sucked his wrist, till the sickle drew out the mangled remains of a snake. He spat copiously several times, then explained disjointedly:

"Ground moccasin—I's suckin' de bite. Got any whisky—or a black chicken?"

"Both," said the colonel, darting in the house and producing a dark bottle with dispatch.

"Here, drink a big one," he commanded, and Forty-Four obeyed with alacrity, smacking his lips.

"What about the chicken—feel any better?" inquired the colonel in one breath.

"Jes' a li'l dizzy's all, thanky. Ef yo's got a black chicken an' kill it an' lemme hab a piece o' de meat 'fore it's dait, I c'n put it on heah an draw de poison out. But it's got to be a black chicken or de charm won't work."

Colonel Yancey called to a young negro girl in the house—

"Nancy, run to the chicken-coop and kill one of those young Orpingtons, any of 'em, and bring it here, quick!"

A few minutes later Forty-Four, seated on the steps, leaning against the big column, clumsily removed the bandage holding the chicken flesh on his wrist.

"Looky dere, kunnel, it's drawin'."

He displayed a small green stain on the raw meat, while the colonel, Mrs. Yancey and several negroes stared.

"Anodder piece put on it, an' anodder drink or two, an' I'll be all right. Kunnel Yancey, yo' sho' is saved my life dis time. I reckon I better go home an' let Creshy put me to bed. I's sorry to 'sturb yo' lak dis, but Misteh Snake might 'a' got some o' de rest o' you. An' I didn't let 'im git away, kunnel. I kep' on till I killed 'im."

"You did that and I'm obliged to you. I'll call Frank and have him drive you home. You can stop in at Doctor Sykes's office and have him look at the bite. And if you need anything I'll pay the bill."

"I doan' reckon I'll need anything more, ef you'll jest lemme take dat brown bottle along," grinned Forty-Four.

And he pocketed the bottle and called it a day.

THIS was the beginning of Forty-Four's almost constant employment at the plantation. His untiring zeal and desire to please compelled favor in the Colonel's eyes, and he found himself entrusting more and more of the management of his hands to the big fellow.

Gilbert was becoming reckless and gambling to an alarming extent. Finally even his father began to voice his concern, especially since he had been called upon to pay some rather heavy gambling debts. One day in the late Fall he called Forty-Four into the little office-room off the portico. The big negro stood expectantly till the colonel said:

"Sit down, George, I want to ask you some questions. First, you seem to know my son Gilbert pretty well. What do you think of him?"

Forty-Four stared.

"Yo'— yo' mean whut does I think of him? Well, sah, sence yo' ax me, I thinks he's a reg'lar limb o' Satan; an' ef you'll 'scuse me sayin' it, unless somep'n happens to change dat boy's ways he's gwine to gib yo' trouble."

"That's about the way I've sized it up, but the fool won't listen to reason or advice; says he ought to have his little fling. Now here's what I want you to do. Find out where he spends his evenings and who with; I can't get on to where he does his gambling. In other words, I want you to be a friendly spy, to look after him and try to keep him out of trouble. He's such a hot-headed rascal he keeps me uneasy. If you get him interested hunting or fishing, he won't mind your going around with him at night, just dropping in where he happens to be loafing or gambling. Get the idea?"

"Yas, sah, boss; yo' jest wants me to take a man's size job lookin' afteh 'im an' tryin' to keep 'im out o' trouble. An' to try to c'nvert 'im widout preachin'. Well, sah, I'll be glad to do all I kin, sah, but I cyan't make no promises as to results."

There followed a strange companionship between the young man and the middle-aged negro. Forty-Four made his advances so subtly and tactfully that Gilbert was unaware that he himself had not made them. First it was fishing, later, hunting; and Gilbert noted with admiration the skill possessed by his guide, child of nature that he was. The latter often volunteered to sleep at the plantation in order to be up early next morning for a good start on the hunt.

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On such occasions Forty-Four would find many things to consult his protégé about, and the conferences regarding guns, ammunition and camping-kit would invariably wind up with a long yarn entertainingly strung out by the guide until Gilbert suggested bed. When the day's small game had been particularly good, Forty-Four never failed to give "Misteh Gilbet" credit for the greater part of the spoils and gave glowing accounts of "dat good eye of his," until the boy really began to take pride in his marksmanship and to enjoy the sport.

The father noted with satisfaction that his son's drinking had marvelously decreased, but he refrained from making inquiries. It would have interested him to observe Forty-Four's diplomacy in that line. Gilbert had early solicited his services as a go-between with the few bootleggers in the vicinity. Being in prohibition territory, it was almost impossible to obtain pure whisky and anything bearing the name brought an exorbitant price. He was not surprized therefore on several occasions to recieve such villainous concoctions that he was forced to give them to Forty-Four who pronounced them "scrumptious" and thanked him vociferously.

"George," he complained one day, "that last stuff you brought here must have been half vinegar—made me sick as a dog. I don't see myself giving you another seven dollars for a quart of such infernal stuff as that. Where'd you get it anyway?"

"F'm some new fellow whut wuz 'roun' heah a day or two. I didn' lak de taste o' dat myse'f, an' I doan' blame you foh not wantin' to give yo' money foh such truck as dat. A man's liable to git poisoned."

He retired precipitously, and once out of hearing he bent double with chuckling.

"Sho' is mo' ways to kill a dawg dan to choke 'im to death on butteh. Dat boy sho' did reco'nize dat vinegah I put in dat—mus' 'a' got a li'l too much in. An' dat polk-berry juice make 'im dizzy, hee-hee! An' he ain' gwine gimme no mo' seb'n dollahs, haw, haw, haw! Well, sah, I done made five dollahs fo' myse'f on dat deal, 'sides doin' de kunnel a favch, gittin' his boy to 'cide to quit drinkin'."

A FEW nights later Forty-Four gave his usual excuses to Lucretia and made his way to Colonel Yancey's gin where a faint beam of light through a crack in the engine-room gave inside information of a crap-game, and low voices told that the sport had already begun. He gave the usual signal, was admitted, and blinked in astonishment to see Gilbert Yancey on his knees in the midst of a ring of darkies, having the time of his life.

"Why, why, Misteh Gilbet, whut yo' doin' heah 'mongst all dese niggahs? Dis ain't no place foh yo'—pokeh's a gemman's game."

"Mind your own business, George. Poker's the gentleman's game all right, but what's a fellow to do when the roads are too muddy to drive to Rosedale, and the governor bucks like —— when I lose a little money. Lend me a dollar, George, I'm broke already. Come on, boys; there's worse sport than this!"

Forty-Four shook his head dubiously, produced a dollar for himself and one for George and joined the game.

"Wal, anyhow yo' cyan't lose very much at a time de way we plays, Misteh Gilbet."

For a number of evenings the game went on and the circle widened till it admitted about twenty negroes. Two new town negroes, Buddy and Dave Brown, were taken in when Forty-Four vouched for their being safe. Gilbert provided a rough table from his father's store, and rough stools formed their seats.

One cold night the game had been in progress for a couple of hours before Gilbert appeared. He entered surlily and it was apparent that he had been drinking. When he saw the stakes on the table he brightened perceptibly, for the boys had been paid off that night and the bidding ran unusually high. He taunted them to raise and produced a quart bottle which he presented to the crowd with a flourish.

"Help 'shelves t' ever' drop of it, boysh. It's besht I've tasted this Winter. Drink 'tall—I've got 'nother quart for m'shelf."

Instantly he was the most popular man in the room. Eyes snapped and murmurs of "some quality gemman," and "dead game sport," were heard as the bottle was rapidly emptied and the game resumed. Gilbert won enought to interest him to play for higher stakes. He was becoming noisy and reckless. Once Forty-Four edged near him and asked if they had not better go. He was cursed for his pains and invited to the infernal regions.

And then suddenly, no one knew exactly how, Buddy Brown, one of Forty-Four's new players, twirled the dice, leaped up and swept the money toward himself.

"No, you don't! Not so fast, you black thief!" countered Gilbert, seizing the negro's fist with one hand and moving toward his hip pocket with the other.

The negro made a like move, and it looked as if he would have the drop on the boy, when Gilbert felt the pistol wrenched from his hand and his head jammed down beneath the table. A quick shot followed by a clinking lamp chimney, and the room was in darkness.

Some one whispered to Gilbert—

"You keep still!"

Then came sounds of a swinging chair, crashing right and left, followed by groans and curses. Two more shots and Gilbert felt himself half-carried, half dragged across the floor. He struggled desperately to free himself from the grasp of his captor.

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Crash! Thud! He could hear the chair being wielded with powerful effect on heads and boxes or whatever chanced to be in its path. Some one was frantically trying to unbar the big door. Suddenly the hold on his neck released for a moment, there was a terrific crash of splintering glass, and he felt himself being shoved through a window. A shot followed the smash and Forty-Four's big form dropped to the ground with a smothered groan.

"Crawl dis way an' keep yo' haid low," he whispered fiercely.

Another shot sounded from within as the big door swung open and dark forms scattered in all directions.

"Can yo' run, or is yo' hit?" murmured Forty-Four.

"Sure; I'm all right," the boy answered shakily, and he did a speedy marathon up the road some distance before he noticed that his rescuer had fallen behind.

He stopped and listened; Forty-Four was groaning. He hurried back in the inky darkness and found him limping painfully along.

"What's the matter, old boy—did they hit you?"

"Yas, in de laig. It's bleedin' pow'ful bad. Yo' run on—maybe I'll git home somehow. It 'ud kill de kunnel ef anything happen to yo'. Yo' bin gibin' yo' ol' daddy a heap o' trouble lately; I's sho glad dey hit me 'stid o' yo' though. Oh, Lawsy!"

Remorse smote Gilbert.

"You put yourself between me and that devil, and I'm not worth it—I'm not worth a ——! I've made a mess of everything I've tackled so far, but I wasn't guilty in that college scrape and I've been sore over it. They might as well have hit me; I'll never amount to anything now. Here, lean on me."

Forty-Four leaned heavily, groaning:

"'Twouldn't 'a' done foh 'im to git yo'—doan' yo' know dey'd 'a' hung 'im 'fore mornin', an' maybe two, three more? De white folks doan' like Buddy an' Dave nohow, 'count of 'em always fightin'. Um—Gawd he'p me! Oh, Lawdy! Is yo' got a handcher yo' can he'p me tie roun' dis laig? I's bleedin 'mos' to death, boy. Ef I dies, yo' tell de kunnel I tried to keep yo' outa trouble. Yo' member I tole yo' craps is a niggah's game?"

"Yes, yes, I know. I'm a low-down skunk. I——"

"An' ef yo'd 'a' got killed, yo' maw an' Miss Doris 'ud neveh ben able to hol' up dey haids, 'count o' yo' bein' killed in a niggah crap-game. Yo' folks is always ben quality an' de name ain' neveh ben trash, lessen yo's gwine to be de one whut brings it down. Oh, Lawd—um! An' co'se, yo' bein' de onlies' boy, an' de las' ob de line, dey nechully 'ud be pow'ful dis-'pointed foh yo' to turn out triflin' white trash. Yo' bettah ease me down, boy—an' lemme die. Tell Creshy good-by foh me. I cyan't git no fudder, an' yo' cyan't carry me. I wish't ye'd promise yo'll tell yo' paw yo's gwine to straighten up an' be a Yancey. Den I c'n die happy."

"I will—I'll tell him. Great God! You can't die like this! I'll run for help. Brace up man—I won't let you die!"

He ran some distance, calling loudly for help. Finally an answering hallo rewarded him and a negro rose from the shadow at the side of the road.

"Is dat yo' Misteh Gilbert? Is yo' hurt?" a voice inquired.

"No, but George Dawson is. He's—he's d-dying, maybe, up the road a little way. Help me carry him to our house so we can get a doctor. This is Dave Brown, isn't it? You tell the boys I'll shoot the one that squeals about this affair, unless Dawson dies. Then of course it'll have to be known. Right over here he is—hurry!"

A WEEK later Forty-Four was taking his first walk with the aid of crutches and getting along remarkably well for one who had been so near death. He had hobbled down the little main street from the colonel's, where he had been installed in one of the cabins since the accident. He had just come from a long private conference with his employer and seemed highly pleased with the result.

Tomorrow he would be moved back up on the hill to Creshy's little home. There was no doubt that his presence would be appreciated, for Creshy had been devotion itself during the past week. They were both enjoying the prestige won by the remarkable story, concocted by Gilbert and Forty-Four, of how he had been wounded by cotton thieves while valiantly trying to defend the Colonel's property.

Shortly after passing the last store on his return, the hero observed that he was being followed. He glanced about furtively, then slackened his pace. His friend Dave Brown approached nervously.

"How yo' gittin' 'long, Misteh Dawson?" he inquired loudly; then he lowered his voice to an undertone and continued: "Say, George, yo' ain't gwine to hol' dat' 'gainst me, is yo'? I sho' thought yo' wuz already thoo de window or I wouldn't 'a' shot dat way."

Forty-Four gave him a withering glance.

"'T'ain't yo' fault I ain't daid! But I reckons I won't hol' it 'gainst yo' long's de kunnel done paid de doctah bill foh gittin' yo' bullet out, an' gimme fifty dollahs besides. An' Misteh Gilbet done 'low he ain' neveh gwine gamble no mo' an' aim to go to law school, so dat's wuth somep'n. I reckons he's jest 'bout ben rascal 'nough to make a real good lawyer.

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"But dat doan' 'scuse yo' foh shootin' so promisc'us-like. Whut yo' s'pose I tuck yo' an' Buddy down dere an' drill yo' how to do it foh? I tole Buddy to make de swipe an' draw de gun when Misteh Gilbet started de row. Den I tol' yo' to shoot to de right, down low—soon's I shot de light out. 'Stid o' dat yo' shoots to de lef' an' gits my laig!"

The culprit cringed before Forty-Four's stern, accusing eye.

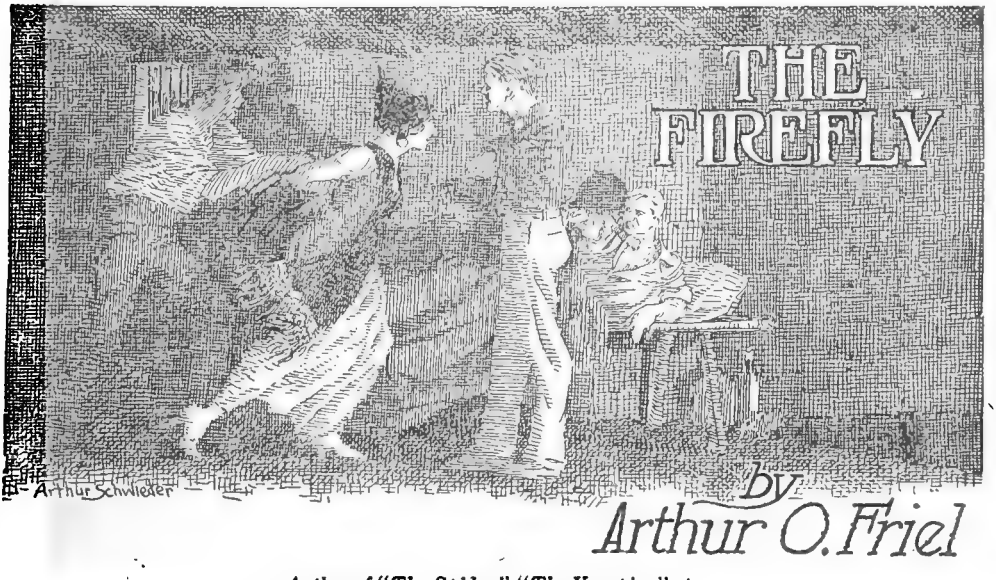
"I—I guess I mus' 'a' got mixed up den. I neveh could riccollec' which wuz my right han'. I wuz mighty nigh scared to death when I foun' yo' wuz shot sho' 'nough, an' I waited an' he'ped git yo' to de house yo' know. An' Buddy, he done run clear to Rosedale to work, foh fear Misteh Gilbet'll git 'im yet. Yo' got mighty well paid foh dat li'l scratch, George," he added significantly.

Forty-Four expanded his chest and fumbled in his pocket. He could afford to be magnanimous.

"Heah's five dollahs to treat de boys foh bein' quiet," he said graciously. "An' yo' can tell Buddy Misteh Gilbet ain't gwine boddeh 'im, an' he c'n come back when he gits ready."

Here Forty-Four's quick ear detected footsteps behind them. He carefully adjusted his crutches to move on, tarrying long enough to deliver this parting advice:

"As foh you, niggah. Yo' betteh learn which am yo' right han' an' which am yo' lef', or yo's liable to git in trouble, an' some folks won't 'scuse yo' lak I does."



Author of "The Spider," "The Vampire," etc.

BEAUTIFUL but false, *senhores*, is the firefly. Beautiful as a flashing jewel floating in the darkness of the jungle night; false as flame without heat, which will neither comfort your body nor cheer your mind.

When the cold southwest winds blow and the *tempo da friagem* sweeps across this upper Amazon, you may cover yourself with those brilliant insects until you blaze with light, but does the chill leave your bones? No. And if the gleam of the firefly in the gloom moves you to follow after and reach for it—beware! You may sink suddenly in sucking mud whence there is no escape. False fires they are, *senhores*—false and cold.

In your own North America, you tell me, the firefly is a weak and tiny thing compared to the big beetle which glows so bright in our Brazilian jungle. That does not surprize me, for the United States is a colder country—is it not?—and so the little light-bugs can not grow so big and strong.

But I am much astonished to hear you say that the fireflies flash their lanterns so that they can recognize comrades and friends, just as men use lights to see one another in the dark. You tell me, too, that the reason why other beetles which have no lights make noises in the night is because they know one another's voices, as we do; and in this way they find their friends whom they can not see.

It may be so. I have noticed that you two explorers know many odd things about living creatures—things which even we rubber-workers who live among those creatures do not know. We are too busy keeping ourselves alive among the dangers of the deadly Javary

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region to study deeply into the lives of beasts and birds and bugs.

Yet as the months pass by we too see strange things, *senhores*. And I sometimes think that the most strange and wonderful thing in all the world is life itself—that unseen power and impulse within a creature which makes it move and act in different ways under different conditions.

Why are we what we are? Why do we do what we do? Why do some men hate each other at sight? Why can some women be trusted and others not? I do not know. I know only that we are wrong as often as right, and I think perhaps we are little better than those lightless beetles of which you spoke, struggling along in life, making a noise as we go, and doing the best we can.

What is that, *senhor?* You say I am a philosopher? I do not know what sort of thing a "philosopher" may be, for I am only an humble *seringueiro* of the Amazon headwaters, and those big words mean nothing to me.

You will pardon me if my talk is tiresome. But perhaps now I can speak of something more interesting as we float on down the great river and those fireflies flash over yonder on the black shore. Listen, and you shall hear of a firefly far more beautiful than they.

IN THE time of the great floods, when all work in the swampy rubber-forests of old Coronel Nunes was stopped by the high water, I had gone out on an adventurous canoe-trip with another *seringueiro*—a handsome, happy-go-lucky young comrade of mine named Pedro. We had paddled far into hilly country on the frontier of Brazil and Peru, and, after using up most of our food and cartridges, had started back to headquarters.

On this return trip I had gotten into a bad fight with some *caboclos* while helping a young fellow to rescue the girl he loved from a cage where she was shut up by her drunken father; and in this fight I had been pounded so severely that every muscle in me was lame. So now, paddling on down the river the next day, I found myself so stiff and full of aches that it was hard for me to keep at work.

I shut my teeth and said nothing, hoping that the pain would work out as my muscles loosened up. In this I was disappointed. True, my arms did not hurt so much after a while, but the ache in my legs grew worse, as they were cramped by the canoe. Besides, I had wrenched my back, and the swing of paddling seemed to give me a sharp stab every time I stroked.

So, though I choked back the grunts and groans boiling up inside me and tried to do my share of the work, Pedro soon felt the difference from my usual power. He stopped paddling and looked back.

"Let us go ashore, Lourenço, and rest today," he suggested. "You are too lame to keep on. I will give you a good rubbing now and another tonight, and tomorrow you will be yourself again."

He spoke sense. But I was feeling sour, both from pain and from vexation at myself, and I would not quit.

"I am not an old woman," I growled. "And you know very well that we can not waste time in resting now—we have hardly any food left, and very few cartridges. I will not go ashore at all today, even to eat. I will push this canoe until dark."

He laughed.

"If you are not an old woman do not talk like one," he advised me. "You speak like a cross old grandmother. What if we have only a little food? The time to worry is when we have none at all. But if you enjoy torturing yourself do not let me interfere with your pleasure. Let me see you do this."

And he twirled his paddle over his head and around behind him in a way that would have made me yelp with pain if I had tried it.

"Let me see you do this," I retorted, shoving with my paddle so hard that the canoe jumped and he nearly fell overboard.

It hurt my aching back, but it showed him that I was in earnest. He laughed again, then settled down to his regular long-distance stroke. And all that day we swung on down the river, covering considerable distance with the aid of the current.

At last, when night was nearly on us, he moved his head toward a cove at our left.

"Unless you wish to paddle all night, *senhora*, perhaps we had better go ashore there," he said. "We must make camp soon if we are to make it at all, and we are not likely to find a better place."

I knew that as well as he did, and I was more than ready to stop. I was rather ashamed of myself, too, for having answered him so sharply that morning. But now he had spoken as if to an unreasonable old woman and even called me "*senhora*," with a mocking grin that made me cross again. So I only grunted as I turned the dugout up the cove, and after we went ashore and made camp I kept my mouth shut. He was in a teasing mood, and I was not in the humor to be plagued.

We slung our hammocks, ate and smoked. Night came before our cigarets were burned down. I intended, after finishing my smoke, to curl up in my hammock and sleep. But that intention, like some others I have had, was not to be carried out.

Lights came into the darkness—spots of light twinkling above us and all around us there in the bush. They floated out over the

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black water too, looking very beautiful as they rose and dipped and drifted in the gloom. Watching them, I forgot my aches and pains.

"We have come into a bay of *cucujus*," I said. "They will swing their little lanterns over us while we sleep."

"I hope they will not show us to some hungry jaguar," laughed Pedro. "I am tired tonight, and I expect to sleep soundly. It would be unpleasant to wake up in the morning and find myself trotting around in the belly of the big cat."

Before I could answer there came a sound. It made us sit motionless, breathless, staring in wonder at each other. It was not a noise of the jungle, nor even the voices of men. There in the darkness, somewhere out beyond the gliding fireflies, a woman was singing!

SOFT, sweet, low but clear, the music of her voice floated to us along the water. In that wild and savage place, far from where any woman should be, it seemed a voice from another world—an impossible dream, which presently would flit away like wind-blown smoke. Yet, dream or not, it held us still as men of wood while it sang on. After a time it died out of the air.

"*Nossa Senhora!*" whispered Pedro. "Are we awake, comrade, and in our right minds? A woman, singing in this black hole where only fireflies live! A white woman, too—for no Indian could sing so sweetly, or would even try to. We have not seen any human thing in all this day, and the last persons we did see were only *caboclos*. Did you too hear that voice?"

I made no answer for a time, and we both strained our ears for some further sound of human life. None came. At length I said:

"Pedro, I do not know what this thing may be, but I shall not sleep well tonight unless I find out. A sound drifting along the surface of the water is hard to place, but this singing seemed to come from the right, at the end of this *enseada*. We have not been down there, and it must be that some one lives there. Let us go and see."

We had some trouble in starting, for the night was so black that we could hardly find the canoe, though we knew just where it was. We had been sitting beside our little fire, you understand, and at first our eyes would not see in the dark. But after we left the shore behind us we began to make out the things near us, though faintly. Very slowly and carefully we felt our way along the murky water toward the head of the flooded bay.

Though the distance was not great, we took some time in covering it. The darkness seemed to grow even more dense as we moved, and the fireflies which before had looked so beautiful now confused us—for in thick gloom a man's gaze will follow a moving spot of light in spite of himself, and where his eyes turn his body is likely to turn also.

Yet they helped us too, those tiny lanterns, for we knew most of them were on the land, and so by keeping away from them we avoided running aground. Finally, however, the canoe bumped softly into the shore and stopped.

"We are at the end," said Pedro, up in the bow. "I do not see anything new. Do you?"

I saw nothing at all but the flaming insects. We stayed there for a time listening. No sound came, except a few of the usual night noises of the bush.

"We had best go back—" I started to say, when I was struck dumb. Near us, ahead of us in the unseen bush, the voice broke out again in song.

"Glitter, glitter, pretty firefly!
Born but to dance and flash and die!
Blaze ye the way through the dark night's span;
Leading me back to the love of my man!
Back to the lights on a far-off shore,
Back to the laughter I hear no more—
Floating along like a star above,
Show me the road back to life and love!"

For long minutes after the song ended we crouched there, motionless and wordless. Somehow I felt chilly, and the skin of my back prickled. The thing was so weird that I wished I were back beside my fire, where I could see Pedro's face and my hammock and the other things to which I was accustomed. And while I was thinking of this, a thing occurred that made me doubt my senses.

Some of the fireflies drifting about in the bush before us suddenly disappeared. They vanished as if seized by a swift, silent hand. Then they blazed out again, but now they were not floating along as before, but resting on something—something that moved. It was too small to be a man, but still it acted like a man. It snatched at the flies and put them on itself. Yet, though the cluster of insects grew larger and their combined light increased, we could not see the thing that did this.

Before us grew the outline of a small head and shoulders, and at times I thought I could catch the glimmer of little eyes, but that was all. It made no sound. It seemed alive yet not alive, human but not human, an uncanny creature made of the darkness itself.

Then we found that this thing was real. It coughed. The noise told us instantly what it was.

"A monkey!" marveled Pedro. "A monkey as big as a child, lighting himself with fireflies like a village belle! Did you ever see such a thing?"

At the sound of his voice the creature stood very still. We knew it was looking at us. Then instead of jumping away and hiding, it moved straight toward us.

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It came rather slowly, stopping now and then, but advancing each time. We kept very quiet. Finally it halted at the bow of our dugout and stood watching us. Some of the light-bugs had jumped off it and others had been brushed away by the leaves as it came, but enough remained to let us see its head quite plainly.

As my partner had said, it was as big as a child. It seemed as unafraid as a child, too. Soon it swung itself up into the boat, and I saw a shadowy arm reach out toward Pedro.

"Welcome, *compadre!*" chuckled Pedro. "You are a friendly fellow. I am glad to find that you are flesh and blood—I almost thought you were a demon. Now sing again for us."

Senhores, I should not have been greatly surprized if that monkey had done so. He had already amazed me much, and he seemed to be the only living thing there besides ourselves and the bugs. But he made no sound at all. I could not see him well, because Pedro was between him and me, but it seemed that he was pulling at my comrade. Soon I found that this was so.

"He is trying to take me ashore, Lourenço," said Pedro. "He wants me to go somewhere with him. And I am going."

Stepping out on land, he added to the monkey:

"Take my finger, *compadre*, and lead me where you want to go. 'Show me the road to light and love.' "

I got out, pulled the canoe farther up on shore so that it would not drift off, and followed. It was quite easy to see the little animal and my partner stooping to give him a good hold on his hand, but I could not see much else.

As I trailed behind the pair I marveled. I have been guided through the bush in odd ways, following sights and sounds and even smells, but never before nor since have I followed an illuminated monkey through blackness, seeking a voice. Yet I could not ask for a better guide than that wordless beast proved to be. Perhaps he did not know where we wanted to go, but he knew exactly where he wished us to go, and it came to the same thing.

The ground under foot was firm and fairly clear of bush, feeling like an old path nearly grown over. We followed our queer guide with no difficulty and with little noise. Presently Pedro halted.

"A HOUSE!" he whispered.

Peering around him, I saw close beside him a section of mud wall showing in the light from the monkey's fireflies. It looked old; it was cracked, and vines grew on it. Somehow I felt that the house was empty. This proved to be true.

The monkey tugged at Pedro, and we went on. I passed my hand along the wall until it struck a window. There I looked in and sniffed. The place was black and had an odor of decay. Nobody lived there.

Beyond this house the monkey pulled Pedro to the right. My comrade made a soft noise in his throat. I looked again. A few strides ahead of us a faint light came out through the window of another house.

Under this window the monkey stopped. Strong wooden bars ran across the opening, but they were meant only for safety, and it was easy to see between them. We peered in, and stood amazed by what we saw.

The room beyond those bars was well lit, but the light was not made by fire or oil. It came from two large hanging cages, out of which shone the lights of many fireflies. This use of the insects was not new to us, for we had sometimes seen little cages of them in other parts of our river country, so that we were not much surprized now. It was the woman under them that held us silent and still.

She too was ablaze with fireflies. They were fastened in her black hair, on the dark-red gown that flowed down around her, and even on her bare arms and her throat. She was slender and shapely, with big dark eyes, a pouting scarlet mouth and a skin as clear and white as the waters of a brook falling over a cliff.

Facing us, she was looking at something near the window where we stood, smiling a little as if she saw something that pleased her and holding her head to one side in an alluring way. With the silent lights of the caged night insects shining softly down on her and the other beetles flashing from her hair to her knees, she was so beautiful that she seemed more than human.

She moved toward us a little, still looking at the same spot, and slowly moved her round bare arms out to the side and overhead. I saw how she kept the fireflies on her smooth skin—they were fastened into narrow bracelets and a necklace made from small vines. Gradually her arms came down until her hands rested on her shoulders, then sank to her sides. Her lips opened in song.

"Come through the night, O heart of my heart!
Speed o'er the leagues that hold us apart!
Clasped in your arms I will——"

We lost the rest. A black hairy thing rose into our faces, startling us so that we jumped back and poised to strike at it. Then, seeing what it was, we withheld the blow. It was the monkey, which we had forgotten and which now had swung himself up to the opening. Grasping the bars, he chattered through them to the woman. She broke off her song.

"You—you little beast!" she scolded. "You frightened me. Stop shaking those bars. Go to the door, and you may come in."

She passed to one side, and at her movement

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the monkey dropped to the ground. We followed close behind him. A bar dropped and a door opened, letting out a vague path of light. The monkey swung himself inside. We stepped into the light and halted.

"Good evening, *senhorita*," Pedro greeted her, sweeping off his hat and bowing. "Do not fear. We are friends."

With a startled gasp she sprang back. One hand leaped to her breast, rose a little, and stopped. Below her fingers we caught the glint of a half-drawn dagger.

"If we frightened you, *senhorita*, pardon us—we shall go away at once," my comrade added. "We are here only because we heard a wonderful voice singing in the night and could not rest until we found the singer. Our camp is down the *enseada*.

"But before we go, will you not sing once more for us? It is not often that travelers in the wilderness hear the voice of an angel."

Though I did not glance at him, I knew he was smiling at her. I knew too what a winning smile this handsome young partner of mine could give a woman if he would. An answering smile came into her face, and in her eyes dawned the look of admiration I had seen in the eyes of other women when they gazed at him. The knife slipped out of sight.

"Perhaps I may," she said. "First tell me who you are."

"Pedro, *senhorita*—Pedro Andrada. I have with me a cross old lady named Senhora Lourenço Moraes. She is very lame, and really ought not to be out at night, but I dared not leave her behind for fear she would fall into the fire."

The Firefly Lady laughed at that, looking much more lovely than before. I grinned, though I did not like to be made fun of before her.

"Your old lady needs to shave," she answered. "Her beard is terribly black. You must have traveled far; is it not so?"

Now I saw my chance to repay Pedro. At the place where we had recently fought the *caboclos* he had led the people to think we were scouts of a big company which dealt in medicinal herbs and bark. So now, to plague him, I spoke up and told her the same tale, intending then to enjoy his efforts to carry out his part.

"We have traveled far, indeed, *senhorita*," I told her. "We have been seeking sarsaparilla and Peruvian bark and such things among the Indian towns above here for the markets in Europe. A big new company of Englishmen at Tabatinga, on the Solimoes, has sent us out as scouts to find where good trade is, before beginning to send in boats for these medical things. We are now on our way back."

She smiled again, very graciously this time, and said she could see we were honest men. Would we not come in? We would, and we did.

AS WE stepped inside I glanced at the place near the window where she had been looking when we first saw her. I expected to find some one sitting or lying there. But there was nobody at all. Wondering what she had been looking at, I kept my eye on that spot as I advanced. Then I saw. The thing she had been smiling at and flirting with was her own face.

On the wall hung a round mirror half as large as my head, with a handle that looked like silver. It must have cost considerable money somewhere, and it looked out of place there against that old dingy mud. Yet as I looked back at the Firefly Lady it did not seem so strange, and I did not blame her for wanting to see her own pretty face; for the rest of the room was very ugly, and there was nothing at all worth looking at. I wondered, though, that she should deck herself with fireflies and pose and sing when there was nobody to see her except that black monkey. Still, women do queer things.

In the farther wall I noticed a door standing partly open. Beyond it was darkness and silence. Nowhere was any sign of another person. She seemed all alone.

"Have you hunger, *senhores?*" she asked. "I have not much food, but you are welcome."

"Do not trouble yourself, *senhorita*," Pedro declined. "We have eaten. It is not food we hunger for, but the sound of your voice—and the charm of your companionship."

She laughed lightly again, and her eyes spoke very kindly to my comrade.

"Tell me more of your company of Englishmen," she said. "They are at Tabatinga? They have not been long in this country! They are rather old men?"

Pedro gave me a queer look. I bit my tongue to keep from laughing and spoke no word. After an instant of hesitation he answered easily:

"You have it partly right. They have not been here long, but they are young men, not old. They are very rich too, *senhorita*—three young men, handsome and wealthy."

"So? And married?"

"No. At least I do not think so. I have not seen nor heard of any wives."

She glanced at the mirror. Then she lifted her arms and floated around for a few steps, her face alight with some pleasant thought. But as she again faced the open door through which we had entered she started and fear flashed into her eyes. We whirled.

Nothing was there. Only the blackness of the night met our gaze.

"What is it?" I asked.

"There!" she whispered, pointing. "By the door! Has he—has he come back?"

We jumped through the doorway, seeking whatever might be lurking outside. We found nothing.

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"Is this a joke, *senhorita?*" demanded Pedro, as we came in again. "There is no danger."

"No, no!" She still looked frightened. "I thought—I thought I saw the terrible face of—of Carlos Guimaraes. If he should find you here he would kill us all."

"Why?"

"Why? Because you are men and here with me. He—he keeps me here as his prisoner."

"Oh! So that is why you are here alone! Let him come," Pedro said grimly. "Killing is a game which more than one man can play. I should much like to meet this Carlos. But he is not there now. Who is this man, and who are you, and how came you here?"

Still seeming nervous, she asked him to shut the door. He closed and barred it. Then, glancing at the other door, he asked where it led. She said it was only the door to her sleeping-room, and so there was no danger from that direction. Then she smiled again.

"It is very comforting to have two strong men here to protect me," she said. "Now come, let us sit by the table, and I will tell you all."

She sank into a rough chair beside a small bare table, directly under the light-cages. There was one other chair, and we looked at each other but remained standing. She rose and sat on the table itself.

"Now there is a chair for each of you," she said. "See the table holds me easily—I am so much lighter than you big men. Sit, *senhores.*"

"We are not '*senhores.*'" said Pedro bluntly. "We are but plain men. Call us 'friends' or by our names, *senhorita*——"

He paused and looked a question.

"My name is Francisca."

He bowed, glanced swiftly around him and sat down in the chair she had used. I lifted the other and set it against the wall where I could watch her face, the window, or the door to her room, all with a mere turn of the eyes. As I sat down I thought I heard a small sound from that other room.

"Is there a window in that room?" I asked.

She looked quickly at me, her eyes narrowing.

"Yes, surely. Why do you ask?"

"I heard something."

"It is nothing," was her swift answer. "There is a—a sick monkey in there—a poor little baby monkey which seems hurt. I found it yesterday and have made a little bed for it, where I can feed it and no snake or other evil thing can harm it."

"That is truly kind of you, *senhorita*," I told her, and said no more.

FOR a little time none of us spoke. No further noise came from the other room, and the only sound was the continual clicking of the *cucujus* in their cages as they tried to leap up and fly. We men watched the big black monkey which had guided us there, and which now had climbed up on the table and squatted beside her. A few of the fireflies still remained on him, and he picked them off one by one and put them on her.

Knowing how a pet monkey will imitate people around him, I could easily see how he had learned this trick—he had seen his mistress fasten fireflies on herself, and had caught the habit of doing the same thing and then bringing the insects to her. She laughed now as she took them from him, and I thought that she did indeed feel safe with us there.

Soon, though, she grew very serious and began to tell her story.

She was not a Brazilian girl, she said, but the daughter of a wealthy Italian. This surprized me a little; for, though I had noticed that she did not speak Portuguese in our own way, she did not seem much like the few Italian people I had seen. Still, different kinds of people may come from the same country, and the Italians I had met were rather poor, while it was easy to see that she was accustomed to the things of wealth. My eye went to that expensive mirror as I thought this, and I was all the more curious to know how she had ever come there. She soon told us.

Her father, she said, had become interested in reports of immense wealth waiting in the Amazon Valley for men who would develop it—lumber, rubber, medicinal herbs and other things—and had decided to come to Brazil and see for himself whether these stories were true. As she was his only child and anxious to see something of South America, he took her with him to Rio, where he intended to leave her with friends to enjoy the society and fashion of the capital while he made his long trip. But after staying for a time in Rio she felt that she would be lonely there during the long weeks when her father was gone; and so she coaxed him into taking her with him.

All the way up the great river, even to the headwaters, these two journeyed together. They stopped at towns along the river, saw what there was to see, and talked with men who were in business of various kinds. Then, as they were nearing the upper reaches and thinking that soon they would turn about and travel back seaward, they became acquainted with a man who had recently come on board—a Senhor Azevedo, who was developing a large rubber estate for some rich men living in Rio. This man invited them to visit his headquarters for a time and see how the work was done. They accepted.

Leaving the steamer, they traveled up into the Javary region in the private boat of Senhor Azevedo. He was a courteous host, and all his men took much interest in showing her father about.

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One of these men—Guimaraes, a sort of foreman—showed much interest in Francisca also. Indeed, he was so attentive that she had to complain of it to her father, who told Senhor Azevedo. This resulted in a sharp rebuke for the man Guimaraes, and for a time after that he did not trouble her.

Then death struck her father. A snake bit him, and in an hour he was dead. And that very night Guimaraes managed to get into her room, struck her senseless before she could cry out, carried her silently to the river, put her into a canoe, and fled up the river in the moonlight.

He paddled hard until dawn, and for several days after that he kept on, until at last they came to this place. What place it was she did not know—it was a town without a name; a few old mud houses, totally deserted except by bats and snakes.

Since coming here she had seen nobody but the man who had stolen her; and even he deserted her at times, going away somewhere for days and leaving her with only the black monkey for a companion. He was away now, and she was alone in this wild jungle with no way of escape.

I heard this with wrath growing hot within me. I wished this Guimaraes would come back now and give me a chance at him. Pedro perhaps was thinking the same thing, for, with a hard note in his voice, he asked—

"Do you think he will return to-night?"

"I do not think so," she said, looking at the door as if frightened by the thought. "He went only yesterday, and he usually stays away for days. Yet I never know when he will come."

"I wonder, *senhorita*, that you can sing when you are alone and a prisoner," said Pedro.

"If I did not I should go mad!" she cried. "When the night comes—the blackness and the loneliness and the cries of animals killing in the jungle—oh, you do not know!"

Jumping from the table, she held out her arms to him.

"Oh, take me away!" she pleaded. "Take me out of this awful place—to Tabatinga, to any place where I can find people who will be kind and help me to get home. Your employers, the Englishmen—surely they will help a girl in distress."

Then, *senhores*, I felt meaner than ever before in my life. I had lied to her—there were no Englishmen, nor were we going within many miles of Tabatinga. But the thought came to me that this did not matter so much after all; for we could take her to the headquarters of our kindly *coronel*, who has a daughter of his own in Rio and would surely do everything possible for the poor little Firefly Lady.

PEDRO spoke.

"Truly, *senhorita*, we shall do our best for you. We go on down the river in the morning, and you shall go with us. We will take you to some one who will gladly help you."

"Oh!" she cried joyously.

With a swift movement she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. Then, glowing, she turned toward me. I got up rather hastily.

"Will you not sing for us now, *senhorita?*" I asked.

She laughed, a clear, ringing laugh.

"Are you afraid to be kissed?" she teased.

"Remember that I am a cross old lady with a terrible black beard," I grinned. "Wait until I am shaved. Pedro has had his kiss, but I can look forward to mine. Now sing—sing something in your own tongue."

Again her eyes seemed to grow narrow.

"Do you know Italian?" she asked.

"No," I said truthfully, "I do not. But I should like to hear a song of your own land, even though I do not understand the words."

"And so you shall," she promised.

Breathing deep, she began to sing in a foreign tongue.

As she sang she seemed to forget us, and into her eyes came a far-away look as if she were gazing across the jungle and the ocean at her home-land, to which she would soon return. What she sang I do not know; but it was gay and lively, showing the joy she felt over her coming escape from this dreary cage. Soon she began to dance also—swift whirling steps in time to the measure of her songs, which carried her around the dingy room in a flashing swirl of fireflies until she was breathless. Then she stopped, panting, her white skin flushed.

Glancing at Pedro, I was puzzled to find on his face a thoughtful frown. But as she turned to him this disappeared, and he gave her many compliments on her voice. Then he suggested:

"We start at dawn, *senhorita*, and it would be well for all of us to get some sleep. We will lie down on the floor beside that outer door, if you wish, and see that nothing disturbs you."

"But no, that is not necessary. You will be more comfortable at your own camp, and I shall be safe enough—Carlos will not come so late as this, and I shall bar the door. I—I would rather be alone, my friends, this last night here."

"As you will," my partner bowed. "We shall come for you at daybreak."

We turned toward the door. She slipped in front of us.

"You will not forget? You will not go and leave me?"

"There is no danger of that," we assured her. "Sleep well, and have no fear."

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She gave us each a little white hand, and we passed out.

"*Por Deos!*" grumbled Pedro. "How black it is! We shall have to feel our way back to the canoe."

I said nothing. We crept back the way we had come, guiding ourselves along the wall with our finger-tips. As we went we heard the door close and the bar go into place.

We found the next house, felt our way along that, and reached the corner where we should turn. There Pedro stopped. I bumped into him.

"What is it?" I whispered, thinking he must have made out something in front of him.

"I am thinking," he whispered back.

"Then think fast. I want to sleep."

Softly he turned around and spoke in my ear.

"Lourenço, I think there is more here than we have seen. It might be well for us not to hasten away. Did you hear that thing move in the back room of her house?"

"Yes. The baby monkey."

"If it was a baby monkey it was the biggest baby I ever heard. It moved only a little, but it was heavier than even a full-grown monkey would be. And here is another thing: She said she feared that this Carlos would come and kill us, and so she had us bar the door. Then she sat down under those light-cages and had us sit beside her. All of us were in plain sight from the window. If any one had come, could he not have shot us through the window? Certainly."

"I thought of that too, and sat where I could watch it," I reminded him.

"I know you did. I saw how you placed your chair. But I doubt if she really fears this Carlos. Perhaps there is no Carlos at all. And do you remember her story of Azevedo, a developer of a big rubber estate in this Javary region? We are rubber-workers, and I never have heard of any big estate run by a man named Azevedo. And here is one thing more: She did not sing in Italian."

"Are you sure?"

"I am sure. Some years ago I knew a man of Italy and learned enough of his language to recognize it when I hear it. What tongue she used in those songs I do not know, but it was not Italian nor English nor Portuguese. She said she would sing in her own language, and I believe she did so. If she deceived us about one thing, why not about others?"

"But surely she stays here only because she must," I objected. "A woman like her would never pick this forsaken place to live in, or even find it. And she is mad to get away."

"True. But—Lourenço I want to know what is in that back room. Let us go back softly and look and listen."

Very carefully we stole back to the barred window where the light showed. Even before we reached it I knew Pedro's suspicion was well founded, for we heard a voice—not the voice of Francisca, but that of a man.

IT WAS a low voice and seemed weak. We could not make out the words until we stopped at the window and put our eyes and ears at the openings. The room which we had just left was empty now, and the voice came from beyond the door in the farther wall.

"But you will not leave me to die!" it pleaded. "To starve and die here alone like a sick rat in a hole! You would not do such a thing to a man who has ruined his life for you!"

Then came the voice of the woman. It was so cold and cruel that we hardly knew it.

"If you die I can not help it. I did not give you the fever, and neither can I cure it. If you think I intend to throw away this chance to escape from this place you are much mistaken. These men are traveling fast and hard—they are gaunt and unshaven—and they will not wait. I shall go with them, and there is an end of it."

"An end of me, you mean," said the man hoarsely. "An end of the idiot who sacrificed everything to go with you to the end of the earth—who stole for you and even killed for you. I saved you by knifing that police agent who trailed us all the way up the Amazon—and this is your reward! This is the love you promised me! To leave me dying, starving, screaming at the empty blackness——"

"What else can I do?" she cut in. "You yourself say you are dying. You are as good as dead already. You can not go out. Even if you were well you could not go out. The police——"

"Yes, the police!" he cried. "I would rather die in the hands of the police than here alone. They would at least be human toward a dying man. And what do you think the police will do to you? You, the enemy of their country—you, the Austrian singer who spied during the war—you, the woman who married a Brazilian for the protection of his name and then poisoned him and fled with his money and the jewels he gave you? Your record is far blacker than mine. What do you think will happen to you?"

"I do not care!" she cried wildly. "Anything is better than staying here in this place where only snakes and monkeys live, and where the only jewels I have are fireflies! Fool! You do well to speak of jewels! You made that blunder in Rio that set the police on us and destroyed our chance of escaping to Europe.

"When that servant of my husband found you taking the jewels you only tied and gagged him instead of making him silent forever, and so he was able to talk when he was found and

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freed. That made the police seek both us and Azul, and they found him too—dead. And when we had fled up the Amazon you let yourself be robbed—robbed, fool, of all our fortune!"

"That is true," he admitted. "But I could not murder that poor old servant. I was never a criminal until love for you made me one, and I am no cutthroat."

"The old story!" she jeered. " 'The woman beguiled me.' No, oh no, you are no criminal—you are not clever enough! But your stabbing of that man who trailed us makes your record black enough, Manoel *meo*, to send you to death."

"I killed him for your sake," he insisted. "And I killed him in fight—he was drawing a revolver. An instant more and we would both have been prisoners. I never poisoned a fond old man as you did—I did not even know you had killed him until you told me. And I am glad I did not slit the servant's throat. A killer I may be, but not a cold-blooded murderer."

"Bah! It makes no difference. You must die if you go out. You will soon die here. Death here or outside—what does it matter? You deserve to die alone after the blunders you have made, and so you shall. And I shall find a way to escape your Brazilian police. You Brazilians are all alike—stupid fools!"

Pedro drew in his breath softly, and I heard him mutter—

"I think you are mistaken, my lady."

The sick voice came again, stronger with wrath.

"Yes, I know your way—a way of falsehood. False to your husband—false to me—you will be false to these men and to the Englishmen also. You are a good actress, with your pretended fear of an imaginary Carlos Guimaraes. You are a fine liar, with your wild tale of abduction and an Azevedo who never existed and a wealthy Italian father—Italian! Ha!

"You have made these strangers swallow your story, and you are trying to lure them also—yes, I heard you kiss one of them! But you will forsake them as soon as they have served your purpose.

"Then you will play on the hearts of those young Englishmen as you have played on mine. You will try to set them against one another, to rob and ruin them as you have done to other men. Or you will tell them you are French, perhaps, and persuade them to help you reach Europe.

"If you are caught, you will swear that I was the one who poisoned your husband and that I forced you to come with me. Otherwise you will think no more of me whom you leave to perish."

"Since you are so wise," she replied, her voice harder than ever, "I will tell you that you are nearly right. I shall make the Englishmen send me to Europe, and there I shall go home to Austria and find again the one man I love—Karl, my Karl, captain of hussars.

"And you are right, too, when you say I shall forget you and your whines, and the fat old fool I married in Rio, and all the rest of your accursed country. And I shall be happy——"

"Ha-ha-ha!" The man burst into a terrible laugh. "Happy! Yes, you will be happy! You will be happy in a Brazilian prison! I am not dead yet, and we shall see!"

"What do you mean?"

He laughed again in a crazed way.

"I am not the only fool! You are one also! Those men return at dawn for you. I shall see to it that they hear me and come into this room, and I will tell them who you are and what you have done. Then you will charm the Englishmen—oh yes—ha-ha-ha!"

For a moment she made no reply. When she did speak her voice sounded like the hiss of a snake.

"So! You will do that! Then you must become silent before they return!"

"*Deos meo!* Put away that dagger! Will you stab me?"

"Hold!" shouted Pedro.

Seizing the wooden bars, he tugged at them. They bent, but stayed in place. I grabbed them with both hands and we heaved together. The whole frame flew outward and I tumbled on my back. As I jumped up I saw Pedro go squirming through the opening.

THE instant he got through I followed him, landing on hands and knees inside. As I rose I saw the Firefly Woman leap into the doorway beyond. Fear and anger both showed in her face. In her right hand glimmered her dagger.

Seeing Pedro bounding toward her, she realized instantly that her scheme had failed. With a scream of fury she sprang at him like a jungle-cat. She stabbed at his stomach. He slipped aside and the thrust missed him. His rifle-barrel smacked against her wrist. The knife flew from her hand to the floor.

Swiftly she stooped to recover it. But he blocked her, grabbed her, swung her up off the ground. She fought, kicked, tore at him with both hands; but he twisted his face downward, shielding his eyes from her nails. I was beside him now, and I caught up the dagger.

"I have it," I told him. "You can drop her."

But before he put her down he strode into that other room. There he caught her hands and held them, and as he let her down he commanded:

"Be still! You will only get yourself hurt. You can not harm us nor get away, and you had best stop trying."

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She twisted and tugged, but could not free herself. So, though her eyes still blazed, she ceased struggling and stood breathing hard.

"Welcome, back, friends!" cried the man's voice from a dim corner. "You come just in time to save me from being butchered."

We made out the gleam of teeth, the glint of eyes and the pallor of a sick white face. I turned back into the outer room, cut the hangings of one of the light-cages and brought it in with me. By the new light we saw a tall, fever-thinned young fellow lying on a rough bed. We saw, too, that he had not long to live.

"You came back and listened, is it not so?" he asked.

We nodded.

"Then you know us, and it is useless to try to deceive you further. A little while ago I dreaded to have you find me. Now I do not care. I am Manoel de Mello, of Rio, and this gentle companion of mine is Frances Andravery—or Senhora Francisca Azul, widow by her own deed. You know, of course, of the murder of her husband, Affonso Azul."

We nodded again. The truth was that we never had heard of this Azul or his murder; for Rio was many hundreds of miles from us, and the news of that city is not likely to reach the ears of jungle-workers at the head of the Amazon. Yet we knew he spoke truth, for we had heard him accuse her of the crime while we listened at the window, and even now she did not deny it. So, as I say, we let him think we knew all about it.

"And now what will you do with us?" he asked.

We looked at him thoughtfully. A few months ago he must have been a strong, active, handsome fellow. Now he was a wreck, too far gone to have a chance for life. We had no medicines, and we knew he would die before we could reach the headquarters of the *coronel* with him. More than this, our canoe was a light two-man craft, and it never would carry all four of us.

"Where is your canoe?" I asked.

He laughed as if the question were a ghastly joke.

"Canoe? Gone, weeks ago! We stole it when we were hard pressed on the Amazon, traveled in it until we found this dead town, and stopped here to hide and rest. Then one night when the water rose it floated away. We never found it. We have no canoe. I ask you again, what will you do with us?"

"I do not know," said Pedro slowly. "If we take you out it will be only to death. We are not police, and it is not for us to punish you. We are not doctors, and we can not cure you. We are not priests, and we can not save you. And I am much afraid, friend Manoel, that you will see few more dawns."

"You have it right," agreed Manoel. "There is little hope for me. And I am not afraid to die—I am glad to die, now that I know how cruel and false this woman is. But I do not want to die alone and deserted."

The woman spoke.

"It is as I said. It is useless to take you out. But these men will take me out, if only to punishment. Even that will be better than staying here."

Looking keenly at her, I guessed her thought: that in some way she would yet succeed in saving herself—perhaps by charming the young Englishmen, who we had said were our employers, and convincing them that we were liars and that she was a much wronged girl. So I decided to kill that idea.

"Perhaps we will take you out, *senhorita*—I mean *senhora*. But not to Tabatinga. We stay here until we have done all we can do for Manoel. Then you go with us to the headquarters of Coronel Nunes, our employer.

"The tale I told you was a joke. There are no young Englishmen at Tabatinga—at least none that I know—and we are not scouts but rubber-workers of the *coronel*. And the *coronel* is no young fool. He is old and shrewd, and you could neither beguile him nor deceive him."

MY GUESS had been right. Her face writhed. With a sudden wrench she twisted her hands from Pedro's grip and sprang at me. I slipped her dagger into my belt at the back, where she could not reach it, and held her off. After fighting me a minute she stood still and began to curse me.

I had heard rough talk from women sometimes in the past, for the women of the frontier are not always choice in their language, especially when angered; but never, *senhores*, have I listened to such words from a woman's mouth as I heard then. No man could have called me such names and lived. But, since she was not a man, I could only stand and let her rave.

At length she choked with rage and could say no more. In keeping her away from me I had moved about so that my back was toward the sick man. Now I heard his voice again, and to my astonishment it was almost at my ear. Turning, I found that he had managed to drag himself up and stood supporting himself against the wall. His sunken eyes glittered.

"A sweet, dainty, lovable woman for men to throw away life and honor for, is she not?" he said. "Yet I have loved her—God, how I have loved her! Now I have nearly reached my end, and there is no escape for me. But for you, Francisca, there is still a way to avoid the prison and the shame awaiting you down the river. It is very simple."

His voice grew weak, and he swayed.

"Since this is the last thing I can do for you, Francisca, I will tell you——"

We could hardly hear him now. He seemed

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about to drop. But he moved his head, beckoning her closer.

"You will tell me what? Speak quickly."

Eagerly she stepped close to him. He straightened. His teeth flashed again. Something else flashed too—cold steel.

A scream broke from her. She staggered back, reeled, and fell.

Swiftly on the breast of her red gown spread a deeper red. Her white face grew whiter. She lay utterly still.

We whirled on Manoel. As we did so, he too dropped. Whether he stabbed himself before falling or collapsed from weakness and fell on the knife I do not know. But he struck on his face, and when we turned him over we found the dagger in his breast, driven in to the hilt.

It looked like Francisca's own dagger. I threw a hand to my belt. Her weapon was gone. Then I realized what he had done. While my back was toward him and both Pedro and I were looking at the furious woman, he had drawn on his last strength to rise, slip the knife from me and stand against the wall until he could lure her within reach. The dagger with which she had intended to silence him forever had done its work—but had found her own heart first.

"The simplest way," Manoel gasped. "No prison. No lonely death. We lived together—we die together. I go out with her blood on my hands. Yet I have been through hell for her. Perhaps the good God will have mercy on me."

"Perhaps he will, Manoel," Pedro echoed. "Truly, there is no hell like the one into which a woman can drag a man."

Manoel twisted once and was still.

We rose and gazed down at both of them. In Francisca's black hair, on her red gown and her white arms and throat the fireflies still gleamed bright and cold. From Manoel's haggard face the lines of pain and weakness were gone. Both slept the long sleep, freed forever from the fear and struggle and disgrace which were the only things left them in life.

"As he said, it was the simplest way," mused Pedro. "It is best for them and best for us. They themselves have finished what they began. Now there is only one thing we can do for them."

Stooping, he lifted her. I straightened Manoel and laid him back on his bed. Pedro lowered the girl beside him.

Then, taking with us the firefly cage, we went to the door, pulled it shut behind us, crossed the outer room, and crawled out through the window. Back down the path we went, found our canoe, and silently paddled back to our hammocks.

At dawn we returned. As she had said, there was a small window in that room where she and Manoel lay. Across it ran wooden bars like those at the front of the house. With our machetes we cut vines and creepers, wove them into the openings until they were tight, and plastered the whole frame thickly with clay.

Then we repaired the broken frame we had torn from the front window, put that also in place, and clayed it like the other. With its outer door still barred and its windows sealed, the last refuge of the Firefly and her lover had become their tomb.

One long look we gave at the dreary, silent town half-buried in the bush. Then we went down the path for the last time. As we stopped at our canoe Pedro whirled, his rifle up. Then he lowered it. Behind us was the black monkey.

"*Adeos, compadre*," Pedro said soberly. "I am glad you did not get walled into that house, for we had forgotten you. Now we go. This is your town. We leave you here to live your own life, as we go out to live ours. Farewell."

We pushed off and paddled away, leaving the queer fellow watching us.

He may be there tonight, that monkey, snatching at fireflies in the gloom at the head of the cove and putting them on himself as he once saw his mistress do. But neither he nor I nor any of us will ever again hear that voice singing in the night:

"Glitter, glitter, pretty firefly!
Born but to dance and flash and die".

Nor will any of us ever again see that woman, driven from the lights of a far-off shore by her crime, decking herself with the only jewels left to her—the natural jewels of the jungle. And it is as well. For all fireflies, beautiful though they may be, are false, *senhores*—false and cold.

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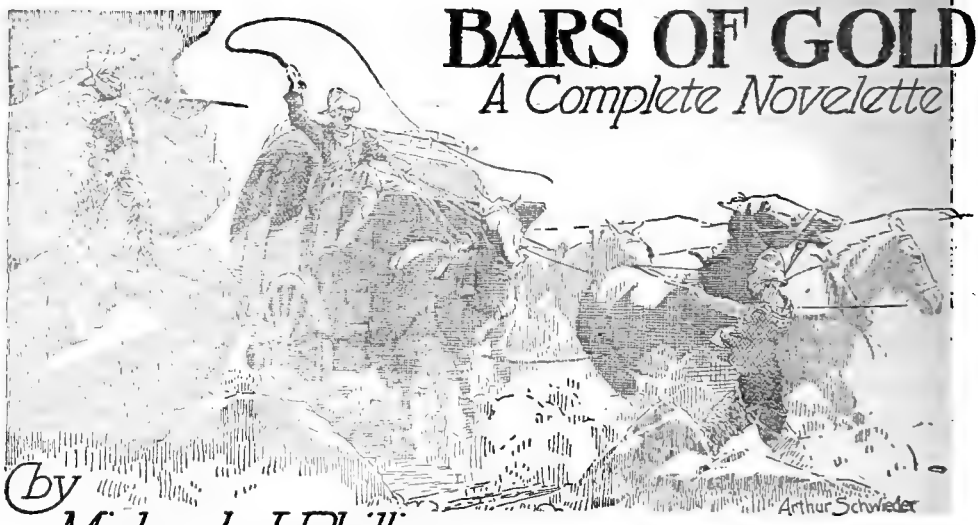
BARS OF GOLD

A Complete Novelette



by Michael J. Phillips

Author of "The Man with the Twisted Leg," etc.

DICK MONTGOMERY and two other precious scoundrels stood in cautious conference in a secluded spot on the Yellow Rainbow gold-mine location. The two were Tony Ramirez, with a black spade beard, and Bizco, a cock-eyed desperado whose nickname means in Spanish "he who squints."

"I will not make the trip this morning," Montgomery was explaining in the colloquial Mexican-Spanish of the Southwest border country.

"I shall have an excuse to stay behind. You will be at the Sugar-Loaf and stop the stage there. The two gold bars will be in a canvas bag. I shall advise this Burwell to hide them under the seat cushion, so you will know where to look."

"These bars—how large?" queried Bizco.

"Small, but valuable."

The American measured off a space of a few fat inches crosswise and up and down with his hands.

"They are worth sixteen thousand dollars apiece."

His listeners thrust their heads forward a little more and slouched their shoulders intently. Their beady eyes exchanged looks of satisfaction. They nodded and smiled at the third member of the trio.

He was a striking and picturesque figure, was Dick Montgomery, shotgun guard on the stage of the Little Eldorado stage line, which ran from the town of El Dorado, near the Yellow Rainbow line forty miles southwest of Phœnix, to the capital. As he stood facing the two Mexicans, feet wide apart, the gun which was the badge of his occupation resting across his left arm, he would have been worthy a second glance from any one. Of medium stature, he carried himself well, and his sloping shoulders and neat trimness gave the impression of a greater height. He wore a wide-brimmed, high-crowned black hat, with a rattlesnake's skin for a band; the skin fastened at the side by a bright silver buckle of a curious design. The brim of the hat in front was curled in on either side from his hand-grasp as he lifted it from his round head. He wore a dark-red shirt, the color being overlaid by deep checks of blue and black. The shirt was ornamented on sleeves and collar and fastened down the front with large pearl buttons.

First of all Dick Montgomery held himself a cow-puncher and he wore hair pants, or chaps, of white, with irregular black spots. His narrow-toed and high-heeled boots were black and ornamented with huge silver spurs. Around his waist was a brown leather belt filled with buckshot cartridges for his ugly little weapon. Beneath this was a narrower belt from which depended a holster carrying a heavy revolver.

Although but twenty-one there was an air of maturity and recklessness about him that made him seem formidable. His brown hair

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was already thinning a little in the center of his forehead. He had regular features, which included thin lips, an aquiline nose and a pointed chin. His eyes were of a peculiar shade of light-gray. At a little distance and in the right light, sometimes they seemed almost white. When he was angered, with a cold, still, interior anger that burned like a blue flame, they grew several shades lighter and fixed themselves with the sinister, unwinking glare of the Gila monster, which by many is more greatly feared than the rattlesnake.

"Sixteen thousand dollars! So," said Tony, exuding a hissing breath from his open mouth, nodding his head again until the broad black beard quivered.

"You speak well, Señor Montgomeree. We take the two bars. And then?"

"I'll meet you tomorrow morning at ten o'clock at the Agua Fria ford and we'll divide."

Agua Fria—Cold Water—river ford was eighteen miles south of Phœnix. It was the way out. If one headed for the scattered ranches which lay between the stream and the Hassayampa; or for the thousands of square miles of blistering desert and chocolate-colored peaks and glistening black lava hills and lonesome, muddy streams below the horizon, he headed for the Agua Fria ford. South of it, by devious trails and hard night-rides and days of scant water, was Yuma and if trouble rode hard behind, the Mexican border. Honest men sometimes went that way; bad men, always.

Bizco closed his cock-eye speculatively.

"*Bueno.* Divide. But how?"

"You between you shall take one bar. I shall take the other."

Tony plucked the half-smoked cigarette from between angry lips and ground it under his heel. He made a gesture of disapproval with his right fist, down and outward, as though the heel of a knife were within it, and he were striking a slashing blow. The cock-eyed one recoiled a step and his hand dropped toward the pistol at his hip, but arrested itself on the way. He noted that the ominous eyes had paled and that the right thumb rested on one of the hammers of the shotgun, though the weapon still rested quiescently across the left arm.

"No, no, *señor!*" said Bizco with low-toned libilance. "We do all the work and take all the risk. You do nothing. And yet you say we give you so much! We give you one-half of one bar. The rest we keep."

"I think like Bizco," agreed Tony.

For a moment they confronted each other, forming the points of a triangle, the Mexicans half a head shorter than the white man. Montgomery gazed silently, first at one and then at the other. A spectator might have noted that they could not bear the dead weight of those cloudy, pale eyes. Their glances fell away. Something of truculence went out of them, too.

"So! You do all the work and I do nothing? It is good. Then I propose you hold up the stage at Sugar-Loaf, or any place else you choose. And you shall have both bars when it is done. But—I shall be riding on the seat with this Burwell!"

He meant it, every syllable of it. He was anxious for this test by fire, more than willing to shoot it out with them on their own terms because he was confident his courage and quickness and resourcefulness would return him the winner. Again they took a step backward and again they gestured. But this time there was no anger, only a desire to placate.

"No, no, no, *señor!*" urged he of the squint. "We did but jest. We shall meet you at Agua Fria ford tomorrow and you shall have one bar. The other we divide."

"But this Burwell," put in Tony. "He has a rifle. If he should resist?"

"He will not resist," returned the white man with a contemptuous lift of his shoulders. "He is not hard, nor quick. He is of the laughing kind. But if he does, you have a pistol, Bizco. And you will be close."

"Yes, I have a pistol."

Bizco took it from its holster and held it up. It was large-calibered and long-barreled. It would hurl a slug of lead the thickness and half the length of one's finger to the center of a target at fifty or even seventy-five feet. The Mexican grinned and tapped the metal rim of the butt.

"It has spoken before," he boasted.

On the rim were filed three rough notches.

"Good."

Montgomery returned the weapon, which he had taken to examine.

"Go by the cut off to the Sugar Loaf. The stage will be there soon. I will meet you tomorrow morning."

"At ten o'clock," agreed Tony.

At first glance it seems the height of folly that Montgomery should trust his co-conspirators. They were desperate men, without principle, who had murdered when murder seemed to them necessary. They had no scru les as to lesser crimes.

And yet a curious code bound them. They had agreed to do a certain thing—to divide the loot at a certain place. He knew that, barring accidents or unforeseen circumstances, they would be there. For their professional reputations were at stake. They would rob a beggar, blow up a widow's cabin, bludgeon a drunken man.

But, as they would express it, what would you? A man's word is a man's word. He gives it and he keeps it. That one virtue may be the foundation-rock upon which all the self-respect of such bravos is builded, since they

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have self-respect of a sort. A hard bargain had been driven with them, but they had agreed to it. So they would be at the ford, if possible. *Bueno.*

THE white man left them and walked a hundred yards to the mouth of the little cañon in which they had been standing. There it turned abruptly to the right and opened on a cleared level space a few rods in extent, about which were grouped the weather-beaten buildings of the Yellow Rainbow mine. Near the south end of this space the stage, high of bow and stern like an old-fashioned pirate craft, stood swinging on great springs. Luke Burwell, with long, blond hair, drooping blond mustache, blue flannel shirt open to show a browned chest, sat on the driver's seat, the reins of the four wiry horses depending from his fingers. He shouted jovially to Montgomery:

"This here carryall is a-waitin' you and a couple o' slugs o' gold, pardner. Better climb up. Hey, you Maxwell!"

Standing by the wheel were Dr. Ambrose Keeley, the mine surgeon, and Pietro Ortega. Keeley was stooped of shoulder, unkempt of hair, and with watery eyes peering through thick-lensed glasses. Just out of college, he preferred this poorly-paid job and the freedom it gave him to follow his experimental bent to building a practice within the confines of civilization. Pietro was a thin, wiry little Mexican, past middle-age, who admired the jovial Burwell vastly. He was man of all work about the mine offices.

Young Montgomery swung himself up to the high seat beside Burwell.

"I'm all ready, Luke," he announced. "But say—" he glanced toward the one-story frame office-building on their left—"maybe I'd better go and poke Maxwell up."

Without waiting for comment, he swung off again. It was a considerable distance down, first from the foot-rest of the seat, thence to a metal step on the side of the vehicle, thence to the wagon-tire and the hub and the ground. He was encumbered by his shotgun which he grasped in his left hand. Part way down he slipped and his right spur caught. He fell rather heavily, the gun beside him. He was up in an instant, but he grimaced in pain and clutched the wagon wheel to prevent falling as he turned his right foot gingerly.

"Shucks!" he said disgustedly, "I've gone and twisted this here ankle of mine. It's been weak since a year ago, since a hawss throwed me in Texas and stepped on it. Believe I can feel 'er swellin' now."

Maxwell, general manager of the Yellow Rainbow, coming from the office with a small sack in his hand, joined the group.

"What's the matter, Dick?" he asked.

"Matter enough," returned the guard, grinning despite his apparent pain. "Better take the gold back till the next trip. I've went and sprained this blamed ankle! 'Fraid I'll have to lay up."

"You certainly will," assured the surgeon. "Can't ride clear to town with that sprain unbandaged. Here, lean on me and I'll take you over to the hospital."

Burwell was looking down solicitously from his seat.

"Hard luck, Dick," he condoled. "But you needn't hold up that gold, Mr. Maxwell. I'll take 'er through to Phœnix. They ain't no hold-up men loose in these parts since they planted 'Lizard' McKale.

"How about it, Dick? What do you think?" queried the elderly Maxwell, a worried frown appearing on his forehead.

Montgomery, an arm thrown about the doctor's shoulder and already starting to hobble away, turned to consider.

"I think it's all right," he said. "As Luke says, it's been pretty quiet around here since Bad Lands plugged old Lizard. But if I was you, I wouldn't put 'er in the boot. Just slap it under the cushion, careless-like, alongside o' you."

"Not bad, not bad," approved Burwell, leaning down.

He took the bag, signed the company's receipt-book, thrust the precious freight under the cushion, where it made a bump scarcely noticeable, shifted his rifle so it rested between his legs, and released the brake. He cracked his long whip over the leaders expertly and with a lift of his elbow to the watching group rattled off down the stony road, while the empty stage swayed and bounced.

An hour later Pietro was sweeping out the crude hospital during the absence of Dr. Keeley.

The guard was sitting on a cot, his ankle bandaged, his feet encased in slippers. Presently he rose and strolled to the window. He did not limp. Pietro, leaning on his broom, raised heavy eyebrows.

"De an-kell get well so-oo queeck?" he suggested maliciously in broken English.

It was given to Pietro to be keener of vision than most about the mine. Instinctively he had always distrusted Montgomery. He had seen into the heart of the man and knew there was no pity nor principle there. He had seen the shotgun man come from the cañon and suspected the meeting that had really occurred. The sprained ankle was but a subterfuge; there was devilment of some sort afoot.

The veiled gray eyes went pale. Montgomery turned swiftly and caught his shotgun from a chair near the door. In three swift strides he was confronting Pietro, thumb on hammer, the black muzzles boring into the Mexican's stomach.

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"Don't you see too much or say too much, or I'll shoot you in two!" he threatened hissingly, pointed jaw outthrust.

"Mebbe so," returned Pietro composedly, and took up again his task of sweeping.

SUGAR LOAF is a curious white cube perhaps ten feet square that stands by the road three miles from Yellow Rainbow mine. It is near the top of the grade that climbs steeply up so that in those days horses labored at a snail's crawl past it, and so close that the whiffletrees sometimes clicked against it. On top of this rock is another and smaller cube which rises perhaps breast-high above it.

Luke Burwell's laboring four were willing enough to come to a stop when a man, masked in a cloth flour sack with rude eyeholes cut in it, stepped out and took the nigh leader by the bits.

"*Alto!*" he commanded, thereby revealing he was a Mexican.

Burwell cursed him for a Greaser and struck skilfully with his long whip. The writhing lash-tip bit deeply through the sack and slashed a small artery in Tony's left cheek. He yelled, but clung to the horses. The stage-driver drew back his arm to strike again, disdaining to use the rifle between his knees.

Bizco rose from his crouch behind the smaller cube, so close he could almost have touched Burwell, but heretofore concealed by the rock. The long revolver, cocked, was in his hand. He fired twice, quickly, into the driver's body.

The whip fell from the relaxed fingers. With a thick, bubbling cough Burwell seemed to telescope into himself. Then his figure sagged forward, hands back to back between his knees, and he dived headlong to the iron road, under the heels of the off wheel horse. Bizco bridged the gap to the stage-top with a single step, flopped back the cushion urgently and snatched the heavy canvas sack. He jumped down as Tony jerked off the blood-stained flour sack and cursed the prostrate Burwell. They ran to their horses fastened behind a convenient rock. The stage team, strangely enough not frightened by the holdup, strolled tentatively forward a few steps and stopped. Burwell's body lay in the road.

Promptly at ten next morning Dick Montgomery, on pretense of joining a posse to hunt the murderers, appeared at Agua Fria ford. It was trampled by many hoofs. He waited until noon, until one o'clock, till two, till six. Then rode away, his pale eyes more than ever like those of a dangerous reptile. For the Mexicans had not come, nor sign nor message from them.

Naturally a wastrel and a wanderer, chance had halted Dick Montgomery in this part of Arizona, and now superstition chained him here. He wandered no more. He was gambler enough to believe implicitly in hunches, and a hunch bade him stay.

He felt that the Mexicans had fled in a panic after killing Burwell. But the conviction was strong within him that they had not taken the ingots of gold with them. Something had occurred to frighten them. They feared arrest for the crime, and, he reasoned in justification for the hunch, they dared not take the gold with them. It was hidden somewhere near and they would return when they dared to get it out. Of that he felt sure. And when they did come back, he proposed to be on hand.

The Little Eldorado stage line gave up after the robbery. Its route went to Wells, Fargo and Company, which took pains to see there were no more unprotected stages sent out with the lure of a fortune in gold under the seat-cushion. Montgomery lost his job though no blame attached to him. Suspicion, even, did not breathe upon him. He went into the mine office, for his education was better than that of the average frontiersman of his day. And while waiting for his fellow-criminals to turn up, he set himself to the task of working up.

THUS the years ran on, until fifteen of them had passed and he was thirty-six. His hair had continued to recede, until now there was a bald strip nearly to his crown. He had discarded plaid shirts and hair pants and six-guns for the quiet and correct clothing of a prosperous business man; for he was now general-manager of the Yellow Rainbow.

Roads improved. The irrigation project was put through. Settlers came into the Salt River Valley. A bridge, two of them, crossed the Agua Fria and the ford fell into disuse. Bad men grew fewer. Lynchings and shootings and convictions garnered the crop, which was not replanted. Phœnix grew into a bustling city with paved streets. An automobile stage line covered the route from Eldorado to Phœnix.

On a Saturday afternoon, as was his custom, Montgomery dressed himself carefully to spend the Sabbath in town. The company automobile which was furnished for his use was in a repair-shop in the city, so he caught the two o'clock stage. The trip which formerly took all day to complete was now but a matter of a scant two hours.

Dan MacDonald, a talkative Scotsman with a square jaw and a clipped and grizzled mustache, was driver of the stage. The seat beside him was empty when the big car drew up in the center of the open space at Yellow Rainbow. Montgomery climbed nimbly in and they were off in the blazing white Arizona sunshine. It was Midsummer and hot.

They talked of many things and came presently to the discussion of a reported gold strike in Nevada. Montgomery doubted the

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authenticity of reports of its richness: That country, he thought, had been prospected too thoroughly to admit of a bonanza having been overlooked. Though of course gold was where you found it, and a good pocket might have been uncovered.

"Well," said MacDonald, talking easily as he guided the stage at a thirty-mile clip over the indifferent road, "perhaps you're right, Mr. Montgomery, but if they keep on wi' their talk about it, I'm goin' over to see for masel'. It was gold that brought me to this country, a matter of eight year ago, and it'll take gold to move me on again."

"Is that so? Where was the strike, MacDonald?"

"It was no strike. It was a matter of two gold bars—buried treasure. Not so much—thirty-two thousand dollars or thereabout. But worth searching for."

Montgomery swallowed unexpectedly and loudly. He feared the driver might hear the sound. Thirty-two thousand dollars; two gold bars; buried treasure. Trace of his gold—at last!

"Well, what's the yarn?" he queried lightly when he was sure he could control his voice.

"Eight year ago," said MacDonald, "I was a deputy sheriff at San Berdoo. We had an epidemic, as it were, of hoose-breakin', and we were all on the watch. I passed a Mexican one day whose looks I didn't like. He had a stiff black beard that bristled in front of him. When I called to him to gie an account of himself, he turned with a gun in his hand. I shot first and put a bullet through him.

"I saw he was done for and he knew it too. I got him to the hospeetal as quick as I could. He wouldn't let me go; clung to ma hand. You know how they are sometimes—the mon that gets them is their best friend. So I sat by his bed while his lips got white and then blue and he told me his story.

"He was our hoose-breaker, right enough. But that wasna' worryin' him. It seems that seven year before that, which would be fifteen year now, him and a friend o' his held up the stage on the very route I'm drivin' now, killed the driver and made off with the two bars of gold from the Yellow Rainbow—your mine. But you must ha' known of the robbery yoursel', Mr. Montgomery?"

"Yes, I recall it."

"Well, they fled wi' their horses to Phœnix. That night they slept in a corral on the edge of the desert, east o' the town. They didna sleep much; fear o' the law was on them, though no one had seen the robbery. But the thoughts o' the dead man in the road and all—well, panic took them.

"It was bright moonlight and they decided to hide the gold, go away and come back after it again. They put the bars in a big coffee-pot and buried it between two mesquite bushes. The first was just outside the back wall of the corral, at the very center, and tight up against it. The second was on a line two hundred feet farther on. They paced half-way and put it down. Then they went back into the corral and buried the revolver which had done the killin'.

"Next mornin' they separated and went their ways. The man who actually shot the driver was the other lad, a cross-eyed *hombre*. It was his gun. My blackbeard came direct to California. He had always expected to go back, but death reached out and took him. I think he told me all aboot it because I got him just where this cross-eye had shot the stage-driver. He thought the coeencidence was the hand o' the Lord, he said. And maybe it was."

MacDonald was silent for a little time while they drew up to a town, discharged a passenger and took on two. When they had hummed through the straggly main street in a cloud of dust and to the yapping of some mongrel dogs, Montgomery prompted him—

"Then what, Mac?"

The grizzled one smiled dryly, as at a good joke on himself.

"Well, the chap was a-tellin' the truth. You do not lie when the Black Angel is flutterin'. I resigned as a deputy and came here to Phœnix, sure that in a week or so I would have thirty thousand dollars. I found the east end of the town. It still faced on the desert, though it had been built up quite a lot. There were three or four corrals, and quite a good many big clumps of mesquite two hundred feet apart. I was conscederable dashed when I saw what it was to do.

"But I got me a spade and started prospectin'. Man, I dug prospect holes a' over the townsheep! I'd squint at the corral and pace, and find the mesquite clump and dig, to no avail. And then I'd squint and pace and dig again. There were few curious folk and I was not distairbed. It was still and infernal hot, bein' the Summer time. I calloused ma hands as they had not been calloused before.

"It was not long until I noticed a tent that did not behave as tents should. It would stay awhile in one place, and the next morn it would have moved. There were squatters on this mesa who would drive in their burros and make camp for the night or a day or two, but this tent was not like that. It marched itself aboot, hither and yon, and never a sight of a soul by it did I get.

"I thought of it nights. There were two robbers, do you mind, and I had accounted for one. Mayhap, thinks I, this was the other, come for his treasure and searrchin' the ground for it, inch by inch. So, one sunup when I found it had stepped along durin' the night, I went to it and scratched on the flap.

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"A dignified old don with white mustache ınd long white hair opened to me. He na loot saw in my eyes what I saw in his. To nake a long story shorter, we compared notes. He was a mairchant of Chihuahua City who ıad befriended the other of the murderers, the ross-eyed lad named Bizco from his infeermity. This Bizco, before he died, told the same story hat Tony had told me. They dovetailed to-ether exact except in the one thing—the vhereaboots o' the treasure.

"I cannot say whether they remaimbered ıo so clear, or whether they could not describe vell, or whether they fogged us on pairpose, ıaving rapinted telling of the gold. But the lon and masel' could get little of value as to vhere that coffee-pot lay hid. It was but a airrch in the dark.

"Well, we joined our forces and prodded and oked at that mesa for two months. When ıy money gave oot, the don bought flour and ıacon for us both. It was sure a fasceenation. Ve were up and at it with the firrst streak of ight. We worked with the sweat in our eyes hrough the blisterin' noon, and we all but roped in the dairkness. We did not do as e had while alone, dig undher the tent. We ame out bold, and parried them that asked. ınd"—he chuckled philosophically—"we found othin' at all."

"No trace?" queried Montgomery.

"No trace. The don gave up and went back o Chihuahua. He would take me with him or we had grown well acquent' in our laborrs. ut I said him no. I have na likin' for the aids and uprisin's beyont. I have sairrched at imes deesultory since. But at last I have iven it over. Yet, I know that somewhere maing those mesquite bushes is a forrtune in old for the finder."

AS BECAME a man in his situation, Dick Montgomery gave considerable attention to his appearance when he eached Phœnix. In the Hotel Adams bar-er-shop he was shorn and shaven and polished, or he would go a-wooing. When his tie was notted enterprisingly and pleasingly and the orter had brushed him until no fleck of dust om his desert ride remained, he ordered a taxi nd drove to the home of "Big John" Chur-ill on the east outskirts of the city. And as e rode, his mind was busy with the story of an MacDonald.

So his hunch had been correct. The gold ıd not gone. It was like the blundering fools, e thought contemptuously, to become fright-ıed at shadows and flee away leaving the trea-ıre where none might find it; where it could o no good to themselves or any one else. He ırsed them bitterly for their inconsideration. e was a partner, the important partner, in ıe enterprise that had yielded this rich stake and they had given him no hint, left him no clue.

His retentive mind recalled exactly the directions that MacDonald had innocently recited. He was familiar with the open mesa east of town, since Big John had lived on the edge of it for years, and he had been a caller at Big John's house on Mesa Verde street since—well, since Kitty Churchill had put up her hair and lengthened her skirts and learned something of the power of her shy brown eyes. Rapidly he ran over the list of corrals trenching on the mesa: Big John's own, Anderson's, Smith's, Bellows', now abandoned, and Toramente's. They were all adobe-walled. Things were free and easy in the old days. Those stupid confederates of his might have entered any of the corrals without question and without hindrance, so long as they happened to be empty of stock. Well, he would see.

The man's spirits had risen tremendously. He felt more of a thrill than he had enjoyed in years. Another hunch grew up within him. He knew that those gold bars—his gold bars—would be uncovered. He would finger them lovingly yet.

The family of Big John Churchill consisted of that rotund and massive man himself; Mrs. Churchill, nearly as big, and certainly as jovial, as her husband, Kitty, Buster, a sixteen-year-old replica of his father, and Babe, a wiry lad of twelve, who could persuade no one to call him by his name, which was John, Junior.

Kitty was twenty-two, in the flower of a perfect girlhood. She had deep brown eyes and abundant brown hair which she parted simply, but with tremendous effectiveness, in the middle. In repose she seemed the modern Madonna. One thought of her instinctively as the happy wife and happy mother. She was both gentle and fiery, always mothering some one, equally at home on a horse or in a ballroom or at the wheel of their big touring-car.

The household is not yet complete. For there was Luke Burwell, son of the stage-driver who had been killed by Montgomery's accomplices. He had been brought from the East, a boy of nine, following the sudden death of his mother. That shock had left a deep impression upon him. And a few days after he had been established in the Churchill home, his father had been shot down. This second shocking bereavement, coming so soon after the other, had left traces that were never eradicated.

Not that he was old or queer or less than normal. But he had a gravity beyond his years, a grownup consideration for others and a gentleness strange in a healthy, outdoors boy. There had never been any question that he should live with the Churchills. Big John and his father rode the range and prospected together in their younger days, forming a tie

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that the valiant frontiersman cherished.

So young Luke stayed on in the hearty, careless Churchill home, receiving precisely the same treatment and the same care as the Churchill children. Strangers would not have known, except for his name, that he was not of the brood. In appearance, he was tall, resembling his mother rather than his father, for he was dark to swarthiness, with heavy brows and thick dark hair. He was a handsome youth at twenty-four to whom war service had given the touch of firmness and decision that he needed.

Dick Montgomery knew him of course for who he was—the son of his victim. His attitude toward the boy was curious. He left him alone, not only actually but in his thoughts as well. He realized the danger of propinquity—that Luke and Kitty might fall in love. But it had not occurred. Their attitude was that of brother and sister. Kitty bullied the rather slow and silent Luke, mended his clothes, advised him mischievously to get a "steady girl" and went with him to the theater sometimes, accepting his escort as she accepted the escort of her father and Buster. Things went on very well. Until they went differently, Montgomery thought, he would avoid and evade Luke as completely as possible and still keep their casual relations friendly. Luke, on his side, seemed content to accept Montgomery as a pleasant acquaintance and an avowed suitor of Kitty's.

On this Saturday evening when Montgomery sat down to dinner with the family as was his custom, he found them gay and excited. Because of the encroaching of mean houses all about their former generous isolation, Big John had at last been heckled and bombarded into abandoning this comfortable but unstylish old home. He had purchased a brand-new house in the fashionable part of Phœnix, on the same side of the city but a mile or more nearer the heart of things. They were to move the following week.

Kitty was in the highest of spirits, matching the soaring optimism of Montgomery, thoroughly imbued with the idea that his golden hunch was coming true. They laughed and chattered until even Big John himself admitted that his dejection was but a pose and that he was eager for the comforts and luxuries of his new home, with its shower-baths and billiard-room and den into which he could shut himself and with his feet on the desk read "The Cowman's Journal."

As the sun was going down behind the mountains to the West in a blaze of red and gold and light-shot clouds that looked like billows of purest cotton, the taxi drew up to the gate in the plastered adobe garden wall. For Montgomery and Kitty were going to the Elks' Theater to see the latest "Broadway attraction," played by the usual Number Four company that ventures west of the Rockies. He handed her in with the flourish of a dandy of her own age.

"Oh, Dick!"

He turned, his foot on the step, to await the lumbering approach of the panting, overfleshed Buster, at whose heels Babe shied, pranced and whooped.

"See what we dug up in the corral!"

Dick took the object, a rust-encrusted, long-barreled revolver, the nickel almost entirely eaten away. He examined it curiously, his mouth dry, his heart pumping like mad. Mechanically his thumb sought the metal rim that bound the bone at the butt. Beneath the rust he felt one, two, three notches. It was Bizco's own gun, that he had buried the night he had hidden the ingots of gold!

MONTGOMERY saw little of that show. At the antics of the comedian he laughed, but only because he was weighing bars of shining gold in his hands. When the hero strode swiftly across the stage he strode with him, pacing the distance from a mesquite to the spot where the coffee-pot and its precious contents were buried. Kitty found him absent-minded, given to laughing suddenly at nothing and answering her questions or comments on the show at random. It was actually a relief for him to bid her good night at her own door and hasten back to his hotel room, where he could think.

There were many angles to the affair, as he discovered when he sat in an easy chair, stockinged feet on bed, smoking cigaret after cigaret far into the night. Despite the uncovering of the revolver, he did not know exactly where the gold was hidden. If he were so lucky as to recover it, the question of title might well be disputed, so the search must necessarily be in secret. And how could secrecy be maintained when houses had encroached upon the wide mesa of fifteen years ago until it was now shrunken like a pocket-hankerchief?

But as he thought and thought hard, things gradually clarified themselves. He would see Homer Sessions, attorney for the Yellow Rainbow mine, to get the information he needed on the legal end of it. California Joe O'Neill was faithful and close-mouthed and would do much of the manual labor of digging. There was a late moon the coming week and they would work nights. But his biggest inspiration was in thinking of Dr. Keeley.

The eccentric physician had left the employ of the mining company several years before to engage in the practice of medicine at Phœnix. Very shortly thereafter he had come out with an announcement that he had perfected an instrument which he called the Great Diviner and which, he gravely declared, would locate

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gold and silver beneath the surface of the earth. The announcement was followed by a wave of laughter that spread from coast to coast. Paragraphers pricked him with pen-points; cartoonists lampooned him. The doctor had chosen an unfortunate time for his announcement since there had been, only a few weeks before, the egregious failure of an alleged rainmaker. An open season of cranks of all descriptions had been declared and Keeley was flayed mercilessly. As a result, he had apparently withdrawn into his shell and nothing more was seen of him or heard of his invention.

And yet, if Keeley said it, there was a foundation in fact for his statement. Queer, he undoubtedly was. But he was not boastful or unreliable. It was at least possible that the Great Diviner would do some of the things which its inventor claimed for it. And if it did have the power of locating gold he had urgent need of it. His confederates had told conflicting stories of the whereabouts of the treasure. Unless he knew where to dig, a good deal of digging might follow. It would be necessary to go very deep to make sure he had not overlooked it.

The fact that the revolver had been placed near the surface was no criterion. They would surely hide the gold more securely. But with Keeley's instrument, if it worked, all unnecessary labor would be eliminated. Protracted labor, too, would inevitably attract the curious, and rival searchers might yet rob him of his treasure. Decidedly the first thing to do was to find the doctor and investigate thoroughly his claims.

Montgomery was up early the next morning. He telephoned his assistant at the mine to send in California Joe on the two o'clock stage and to look after things for a few days, since he would be detained in town on business. He located Dr. Keeley's residence in the city directory and went out to the address given in a hired car which he drove himself.

It was an unpainted, one-story frame house, scarcely more than a shack, on the Tempe road beyond the State Hospital for the Insane. Apparently the doctor lived alone. He answered Montgomery's knock and was reasonably cordial. He was still the unkempt, shabby man with the thick-lensed glasses, a little older, apparently a little lazier and queerer. The interior of the cottage was quite clean. A long shelf on one side of the single room, above a water tap and sink, was filled with bottles, glasses, a retort and various scientific instruments. On the opposite side of the room was a crude case filled with books, mostly with long hard names on the back. The furniture was of the simplest, the bed a canvas cot.

"Doc," said Montgomery presently, when the preliminaries had been disposed of, "a while after you left the mine, I read of an invention of yours to locate precious metals. What was it you called the thing—the Great Diviner?"

An angry light came into Keeley's eyes.

"Did you drive clear out here to make fun of me?" he demanded.

"Of course I didn't," Montgomery hastened to assure him. "But I'm interested in that invention. If it will do the business it will put considerable money in both our pockets."

"If it will do the business!" echoed Keeley scornfully. "You're like all the rest of the world. Because the devilish newspapers abused me and laughed at me, not a soul, not a single soul, was fair enough to test it out!"

He leaned forward to shake a gaunt, knobby forefinger, disfigured and stained by acids, at his dapper visitor.

"Montgomery, the Great Diviner, absolutely without fail, will locate gold and silver. It doesn't matter how far below the earth's surface the metal may be. I admit that it functions precisely alike for both; neither can I tell the quantity by its reactions. A small body of ore or a coin, even, near the surface causes as great a reaction as a great body far down. But it has never failed and I have tested it thousands of times."

"Great stuff if she'll do that," observed Montgomery, impressed by the man's earnestness. "It ought to make a quick job of pointing the way to a tidy little fortune. Say, not doubting you at all, Doc, but can't you show me what she'll do?"

"I was about to suggest that," returned the doctor. "You have gold and silver coins? That's good. Bury them in the sand on the north side of the house. I'll stay inside. There are no windows overlooking what you do."

Montgomery went out-of-doors. The yard was a waste of fine white desert sand. Scooping it up with his fingers, he buried to a depth of a foot or more, in various places, a quarter, a dollar and a twenty-dollar gold piece. Then he smoothed the surface over so that it was impossible to detect where he had worked. He went to the door.

"All ready, Doc," he announced.

Dr. Keeley came out. He carried, grasped by the ends with his two hands, a thin, flat piece of steel slightly more than two feet in length. It looked very much like a corset steel, except that to the center was lashed neatly a small chamois bag which bulged under its contents.

"What's in the bag?" asked Montgomery, curiously.

"The chemicals which locate the metal," replied Keeley. "Now watch."

He walked slowly over the sand, holding the steel firmly in his clenched hands, fingers down. The steel was thus flat, the chamois bag perching on top of it like an overgrown bug. Quite of its own volition, before he had

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taken a half-dozen steps, the steel began to twist. His hands were in the same position, held rigidly and horizontally in front of him, backs up. And yet the metal buckled and turned outward and downward, until the chamois-covered lump was pointing toward the earth at an angle and still straining to drag the steel completely over.

Keely squatted, still careful not to move his hands in relation to his body or to each other. With something of awe Montgomery noted that as the steel approached the ground the movement of the chamois lump indicated unerringly a certain spot in the earth. There was something weirdly human, or at least sensate and animal-like, about it. The reaction was for all the world like a bird-dog pointing its quarry.

The doctor released his grip and dug in the sand at the indicated spot. In a few seconds he had unearthed the dollar which his visitor had buried. The process was repeated and the other coins uncovered in the same way.

Fascinated as a child with a new toy, Montgomery tested the Great Diviner again and again. He wrapped his gold watch in a handkerchief and buried it, his silver penknife and a gold-mounted pencil, only to have the uncanny thing nose them out without a false start or an instant's delay. Varying depths made no difference with its efficiency.

"I'm satisfied," said the mining man at last, drawing a long breath. "I was from Missouri, and this bird has showed me, Doc. Now let's get down to business.

"I know where some gold bullion is buried—about, not exactly. It's worth quite a little—oh, say ten or eleven thousand dollars. I've hired a man to do the digging. He's a friend of mine and I've promised him a thousand dollars. What's your terms?"

"Five thousand dollars," was the prompt response.

This was the sum that Montgomery had decided he would pay for the services of the Great Diviner if it proved successful, but for strategy's sake he was moved to mild remonstrance.

"Ain't you a little steep?" he queried. "That leaves me only half, maybe less than half, of the stake."

"Take it or leave it," returned the doctor indifferently. "But those are my terms."

"All right," replied Montgomery briskly. "I take it. I'll drive out here and get you tomorrow evening. You be ready."

HE MET the stage which arrived at four o'clock and on which, to his satisfaction, he found "California Joe" O'Neill. The latter was tall and gaunt but with a tremendous frame and great muscular power. He had red hair, a drooping red mustache and usually a red stubble on his jaws which showed a mixture of gray. He never came to town that he did not get drunk, unless there was business on hand. Under such circumstances he was a model of sobriety. An explosive way of talking and a thin, high voice which issued oddly from one of his bulk kept California Joe from being in any degree commonplace. It was a tradition among the older residents that before the days of a jail in Phœnix, when prisoners were shackled to a cottonwood log in the public square for safekeeping at night, Joe awakened from a bibulous slumber to find himself the cottonwood's only boarder.

It was a long log and a thick log and a heavy one, but a great thirst was upon him. The manacles were fortunately attached to chains of generous length. So he hoisted his prison upon his shoulder and carried it to the nearest saloon a block away, where he loudly demanded drink. Approaching age had somewhat tamed Joseph. He was now a surface man at the Yellow Rainbow and considered himself a personal retainer of Montgomery's.

"Joe," said the manager, when the redhead had alighted, "go over to 'Cactus Billy's' and stay there till I send for you."

"Yes, sir," returned Joe.

"I have a particular job for you. No whisky until it's over."

"No whisky," agreed Joe manfully as he stifled a sigh.

"And a hundred dollars when it's done."

"A hundred dollars!"

After a heartfelt sigh at prospect of getting this fabulous sum, Joe turned without ceremony toward Cactus Billy's lodging-house in such haste that a spectator might have been justified in assuming that the money was awaiting him there. As he was in town for a few days only—something less than a fortnight—he had not troubled to bring any baggage

Satisfied that O'Neill, sober, would be where he was wanted when he was wanted, Montgomery returned to the Churchill place to spy out the land. It was easy to bring the conversation around to the find of Buster and Babe in the corral, to re-examine the revolver; to assure himself without doubt it was Bizco's; and to locate the exact place where it had been dug up. Then he strolled out on to the flat while the two boys played Indian with the rusty weapon.

Here he discovered that his troubles were beginning. There was no mesquite close to the rear wall of the corral and opposite its center. There was a medium-sized shrub perhaps ten feet away, a monster sixty or seventy feet beyond that, and a third considerably to the left of a straight line from the rear of the corral. This latter, however, was about two hundred feet from the corral wall, which tallied with MacDonald's story. He assumed that the

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Mexicans, being agitated when they covered up the evidences of their crime, had not observed closely. These two must be the ones to which Tony had referred in his dying conversation with the deputy sheriff. In fact he soon persuaded himself that they were. All in all, it was a pretty good day's work he told himself when he left the house that night and returned to town. But doubtless Kitty had found him an unsatisfactory cavalier.

He decided on one change of plans. Since the Churchills were to move out on Monday and Tuesday, he would wait until Tuesday night before beginning his explorations, and thus avoid possible complications. It would be as well if they did not know of his search until it was successfully completed. He had a morbid fear of ridicule. Especially, he did not want to appear ridiculous in Kitty's eyes. Already he was carrying the handicap of fourteen or fifteen years' disparity in their ages.

On Monday morning he called on Homer Sessions, of Sessions, Tupper & Rice. Sessions was a young-old man with prematurely gray hair parted in the middle, a long, clean-shaven face and old-fashioned gold-rimmed nose-glasses. He received the manager cordially.

"Homer," said Montgomery casually, when their cigars were alight and Sessions' private office was closed against interruption, "I heard a funny thing Saturday. You remember the holdup of the Little El Dorado stage about fifteen years ago, when the driver was killed and a couple of bars of gold taken?"

"Very well, Dick, though I was a youngster at college."

"Well, a stage-driver I rode with used to be a deputy sheriff in California. He shot a Mexican out there some time ago and before the fellow died he confessed he was one of the two men who robbed the stage."

"You don't say!"

Sessions took his cigar from his mouth and leaned forward, obviously interested.

"Yes; and the Mexican told him where the gold was hid but this stage-driver never could connect up straight enough to find it. He tells me he's got some new dope now and he expects to locate it."

"Very interesting, Dick, very. Hidden near here, was it?"

"Right here in Phœnix, I understood him to say. Now what I want to know is this: How does that case stand, anyway? Suppose he does go ahead and find that gold; could he keep it without trouble, or have we a claim on it as a mining company?"

"I think I could answer that offhand," replied Sessions, pressing a buzzer, "but I'll just refresh my memory from the files. That affair made a very deep impression on me. It was picturesque and tragic and I went into it pretty well when I was home on vacation, though father handled it."

To the clerk who came he said—

"Please get me the file in the Little El Dorado stage matter."

When the large, bulging manila envelope had been brought and he had ruffled through various creased and faded papers, he leaned back in his chair and removed his nose-glasses. As was his habit, he tapped the successive knuckles of his long white left hand with the rim of the glasses as he talked:

"The property consisted of two gold bars of the value of thirty-two thousand, three hundred and seventy-five dollars. They were turned over to Luke Burwell, driver of the Little El Dorado stage for transfer to Phœnix, where they were to be delivered to the Ranchers' and Miners' National bank. When they were stolen the Yellow Rainbow Mining company immediately notified the Little El Dorado of its responsibility, since Burwell, a duly authorized agent of the stage line had receipted for the gold and had received it for transfer.

"I will say that the Little El Dorado people acted honorably throughout. Their company was really a very loose and irregular copartnership. There were three surviving members, Jerry McGlynn, Henry W. Brinton and one Buck Hazen. Though it took practically all of their assets, these men promptly paid the claim of the Yellow Rainbow in full. Soon thereafter, being single men with no particular ties, they drifted away.

"The mining company, through father's office, kept in touch with them as far as possible, on the theory that the gold might be recovered and they would be entitled to a refund of the amounts paid. McGlynn was shot in a row at Tombstone. Brinton died of pneumonia at Yuma. Buck Hazen went to Alaska and there all trace of him was lost. He has been missing for ten years. There is pretty conclusive evidence that Hazen was not his real name; anyway, he is legally dead because of his protracted absence. Because of the lapse of time—fifteen years—that the gold has been missing, and the only man who could positively identify it by its shape and general appearance, Martin Maxwell, former general manager, is also dead, those bars, if your man does find them, are treasure-trove."

"Treasure-trove?"

"Yes; in the finders-keepers category. The chap who turns them up has a claim, generally speaking, that he could defend successfully in any court. There are modifying circumstances of course, if found on public ground, and all that sort of thing."

"Well," grinned Montgomery, "I think I'll repeat to this chaffeur what you just told me and charge him a couple of thousand dollars for legal advice. You see," he went on easily,

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"I know him pretty well, ride with him often, and all that, and he was telling me this as a friend. I'm much obliged to you, Homer."

"Oh, that's all right, Dick," returned the lawyer. "It would be pretty nice, picking up thirty-two thousand dollars like that, eh?"

Montgomery, his pale eyes glowing, laughed a trifle overheartily.

"I'll say it would!" he agreed, shaking hands.

IT WAS late Tuesday night when Montgomery, Dr. Keeley and California Joe drove to the mesa in the general manager's car, which he had secured from the repair shop. From it they took spades, a pick, a bucket and a rope. The latter two articles of impedimenta Montgomery did not think would be necessary, but he felt that it was well to be prepared for all emergencies. The moon had not yet risen, though there was a preliminary glow behind the Eastern mountains.

Their appearance was the signal for a wild outburst of barks, howls, bays and whines that made the night a vast discordance. Many of the small encroaching shacks about the mesa were occupied by Mexicans and each shack besides an abundant family, housed from one to three dogs. Each was outside, searching for food, fight or frolic and they forgot all other interests in a sincere attempt to intimidate the intruders. Montgomery swore in a snarling undertone and brought out the automatic he had always carried.

"What'll we do?" he inquired. "They'll rouse the neighborhood."

"Get where we want to go, boss, an' sit still," advised California Joe. "They'll quiet down when they get used to us."

By the aid of an electric torch, since this seemed good advice, the mine manager found the approximate locality where he believed the gold to be hidden, and they dropped their tools and squatted in the sand, controlling their impatience as best they could. The moon rose, a great white shield. They attempted to start digging by its light, but could not do so. The first movement renewed the canine chorus and they, perforce, sat down again. For more than an hour they sat glumly, keyed to the keenest excitement, wild to begin and yet not daring to move, for the last preceding outburst had been followed by the appearance of a light in one of the shacks.

It was almost one o'clock before they arose cautiously. A single dog barked half-heartedly and was still. It was now almost as light as day, but with the light that slurs and distorts and buries details like a cubist painter. Dr. Keeley drew his Great Diviner from its multiplied wrappings, grasped it firmly in his two hands and stooping over began to walk slowly in a widening circle. Almost at once he stopped, tense, as the angler braces himself when the bait is vigorously struck. The thin steel had wrenched itself over in his hands. The chamois bag was pointing directly to the ground.

"Dig!" he commanded, hoarsely.

Montgomery and California Joe seized spades and thrust them deep into the sand across a space perhaps six or eight feet wide. At an equal distance between them was the spot that the Great Diviner had indicated. Keeley rewrapped the steel, placed it on his coat and took the third spade, so that now they were working on three sides of the square. The moonbeams reflected queerly from his thick-lensed glasses.

Presently the sand gave way to adobe soil, which was heavy and sticky. They panted and sweated. The hole grew too narrow for three, and Keeley fell out. They were down three feet, four feet, and had found nothing. At five feet there was room for but California Joe. He seemed tireless and scoffed when they suggested relieving him. At five and a half feet his spade gave off a squashing sound as he drew it away, filled.

"I've struck water," he announced.

They looked at each other in dismay. Keeley unwrapped the instrument and slid into the hole. Once more it turned in his hands until the chamois bag turned directly downward.

"It's there, all right," he announced tersely when Montgomery had given a hand out of the well.

California Joe leaned on his shovel. The others stood above him, confronting each other, questioning.

"We're in wrong, somehow," declared Montgomery, with an oath. "There was no water here when that pair—when they buried the gold. They'd never gone down so far, either. What do you make of it, Doc?"

"The gold is there," returned Keeley, stubbornly. "The Great Diviner says so."

"Maybe it is, but we seem to need a diving-suit to get it," was the other's bitter comment. "I don't savvy——"

Keeley struck his hands together excitedly.

"I do! Remember the big flood of seven—no, eight, years ago? It washed through here, made a watercourse out of this, brought in a whole lot of gravel. The adobe soil has caved in on it, and sand blew in on top of that again. The gravel has remained and the underground watercourse follows it. Your gold ought to be three or four feet below the water. Where Joe is now is the level that existed when they buried the gold."

Montgomery nodded his agreement and satisfaction.

"By thunder, you're dead right! That's just what happened. Tie into it, Joe, or do you want me to spell you for a while?"

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"I do not," replied the gaunt man, scorn in his thin voice. "Sure, this is but child's play."

It went on as before only now instead of adobe soil, gravel and sizable stones came out. As the hole sank, the water rose. Joe was working in it to his knees, then to his hips. They stopped to bail, taking out numberless pailfuls by means of the rope and occasionally baptizing Joe when the pail caught on a jutting rock on its upward journey.

The moon grew pale; false dawn glimmered wanly in the East. The water was now waist deep. Larger stones were coming out. Moments of nerve-racking suspense were frequent when Joe would announce—

"I feel something heavy!"

Montgomery had long before unwillingly explained that the treasure was in the form of two ingots in a coffee-pot that had probably rusted almost away, so they knew what to expect. When the big man had panted out his brief sentence, there would be a pause as he worked with his feet to loosen the heavy object. Then, taking a long breath he would throw himself downward, becoming completely submerged beneath the muddy water.

Then he would come up, puffing and blowing, something clutched against his stomach. He would get his great forearms under it and heave mightily upward. Always it was the same: A rock would arch out of the hole and alight at their feet.

"Only another rock," Montgomery would grind out with a curse, and the big man, wiping the water from his eyes with his forearm, would patiently resume his task.

At dawn, when the doors of several shacks were opened and they suspected that unseen eyes were watching them curiously, they gave over. The hole was now incredibly deep. A test by the Great Diviner still indicated precious metal beneath the center of it. But it was not the metal they sought. No two men, unequipped for digging and with the haste of blood-guiltiness driving them, would burrow so deep to bury their plunder. The bars were not there.

"KITTY, I'm a failure—a rank failure!" Luke Burwell and Kitty Churchill were driving back from Buckeye, a town in the fat valley beyond the Agua Fria, where Big John owned a prosperous general store. That is, Luke was a passenger. Kitty, dark hair uncovered, sleeves rolled to dimpled elbows, was making the big car hum over the good and old road.

The girl smiled at his impulsive words. She knew that no man of twenty-four or forty-four or fifty-four, is a failure unless he thinks so, and twenty-four never thinks so long. There is too much rebound for gloom in the twenties. They may descend to doleful depths, but they always spring back to sun-crowned heights.

"Why, Luke?"

"Oh, because! I haven't done anything; I haven't gotten anywhere! I can't do anything well. I want to be a farmer, and a farm is the only thing dad doesn't own."

"Well, there's plenty of time, isn't there?"

"No, there isn't! I'd ought to be at it now."

The girl sobered.

"You can't go, you know, Luke. Dad depends on you in everything. He thinks your judgment on a deal is as good as his own. He won't make a move until he advises with you. So you'll have to wait till Buster——"

"Oh, I know I shouldn't have said that," the young man interrupted contritely. "And I didn't mean it. Dad—all of you, have been so wonderful to me. It's the least I can do to stick around unless he'd tell me I could—but gosh! I sure would like to ranch it!"

"Well, I've come to the conclusion you should be doing something for yourself," remarked the girl with an air of venerable wisdom, "and I've fixed it up to stake you to a ranch."

"Ho, ho!" He scorned her openly, big brother fashion. "You stake me! What with—your weekly allowance?"

"If you'll wait, Mr. Smarty, you'll hear what with," she rebuked. "I heard something a couple of weeks ago and I persuaded Dad to give me the corral back of the old house down on the east side. Not just 'All right, you can have it,' but a deed in regular form. And now I'm going to sell it to you on time, so much down, you know, so you can make some money and buy your old farm!"

"So I can make some money," he laughed. "Well, what did you hear?"

"I had dinner with Annie Belle Stever. Her father's the architect, Erasmus Stever, you know, and he talked shop to us at table.

"It seems lumber's so high no one wants to build frame houses any more. Brick is scarce. The only things left are stone, higher yet, and adobe. The building fever is here and getting warmer, he says, and some of the wise ones have been experimenting with adobe; for nice homes, you know. They've finally mixed a thin and cheap cement to cover adobe walls and protect them from the rain. An adobe house, even with this cement, costs only about half what a frame or brick one does.

"He has been drawing a lot of attractive designs for adobes. So have all the other architects and builders. People are interested. Both dailies will run special adobe pages each week, giving designs and photographs. They will tell that adobe is everlasting when treated with this cement; that it's picturesque and historic and suited to desert surroundings like no other material; that it's cool in Summer and

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warm in Winter, and ever so many other things. But——"

"But what?"

"They're doing all this, as much to get men to make adobe bricks as for any other reason. There is no organized output now, he says. A few Mexicans work occasionally turning out brick, but unless they can interest manufacturers, there won't be any to be had. He thinks there's a good profit in them. A few years ago they were selling at five and ten cents apiece; now they are selling at twenty-five and forty cents apiece. And so——"

"And so— What's the rest of it?"

"I'll sell you my corral and you'll make adobe bricks enough to get rich and buy yourself a ranch. I know you'd never ask dad for money so long as he wants you to stay with him."

"You're right there, Kitty. But how do you know there's adobe soil in the corral?"

"You poor thing!" she ejaculated pityingly, trusting to the sense of touch to keep the car in the road while she looked full at him.

"Isn't it surrounded by an adobe wall? And wasn't the wall made right on the premises from adobe taken right out of the corral?"

"Yes, yes!" agreed the laughing Luke. "I'll agree to anything—if you'll only keep your eyes on the road."

"Well, then! What's wrong with my scheme?"

"Nothing. Only I can't let you do anything like that for me."

Very deliberately Kitty took her foot from the accelerator, turned the car to the side of the road and applied the brake. When the car had come to a stop and she had shut off the engine, she gave her companion a long look of weary impatience.

"'I can't let you do anything like that for me!'" she mimicked, and stuck out a pink tongue at him. "How—how Don Quixoty we are! Did you, when you were a kid, spend all your pennies to keep me in candy and chewing gum, or didn't you? You did! And did you buy me apples when apples in Phœnix were almost as rare as auk's eggs? And did you, when I broke old Fussy Fairbrother's window with the ball, go downtown and shine shoes to earn the two dollars to pay for it, so he wouldn't tell dad? You know you did! And did you give me dimes for moving-picture shows, when I had spent all my own money for chocolates? And did you ever, when I was away at school, write me a letter that you didn't slip a five or a ten-dollar bill into, for fear my allowance wouldn't carry me through? And now you can't let me do anything for you!"

"But, but, Kitty, be reasonable. This is different."

"It is not! The principle's just exactly the same. What I want to do for you isn't one-half or one-quarter or one-dozenth what you've done for me. And if you won't let me do it, I think you're just m-m-mean!"

All the indignation had spent itself and was replaced by a sense of grievous injury. Kitty's lips trembled and there was a mistiness in her brown eyes that brought the young fellow to groveling remorse.

"Aw, now, Kit, I didn't mean it—really I didn't!" he hastened to assure her. "Of course I'll let you do it. I'm crazy to try the adobe game. In fact, I've been thinking it over for weeks, ever since I saw a whole bunch of adobes going up over on the west side. I think there's a chance to make a cleanup."

The mistiness disappeared and she rewarded him with a dazzling smile.

"Well, that's something like! I knew you were a regular fellow, Luke, unless you'd gone and changed on me somehow when I wasn't looking. Suppose you do clean up, though: What are you going to do with all your money?"

His face lighted magically.

"Drive on down this road till I tell you to stop," he commanded.

She started the car and they moved swiftly forward over a gentle incline for perhaps a mile, until they had reached the crown of the rise. There he halted her. The road was flanked by sod instead of desert sand and there was a noble double row of cottonwoods, towering skyward, their toes in the irrigation ditches that paralleled the highway. In front of them, on a level, grassy space, was a mean and tumble-down house. Behind the dwelling and on either side was a row of cottonwoods, forming a great U. The location of the dwelling was excellent. Front and back it commanded the country for miles, and it was so placed that it would catch any breeze.

"This is the Andrews place," said Luke. "There's a full section, six hundred and forty acres, a mile square, lying along this road. It's gone to rack and ruin and it could be had cheap, because none of the heirs live here and they're anxious to close it out and divide the estate. See how the house is falling to pieces. And the ditches are full of gaps. It has been rented for years and tenants don't take care of things.

"Well, if I could get my hands on this section, I'd raise thoroughbred cattle and hogs. There's plenty of pasture and the best alfalfa land in the Salt River Valley. Phœnix would absorb all the milk and butter and beef and pork I could raise at top prices. That ranch would pay for itself in three years if it was handled right."

"And you'd live in that magnificent house, I suppose?" queried Kitty, demurely.

"Freshy!" returned Luke instantly and automatically, as in days of childhood. Then he went on:

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"No, I wouldn't. Want to hear about my house?"

She nodded.

"Well, it's to be U-shaped, one-story, of adobe cemented with this mixture you tell about, and with a red-tiled roof. The center of the U will be the living room, forty feet long by twenty feet wide, with a great stone fireplace opposite the double oak front doors. It will have three or four French windows, front and back, so all the light and sun can come in. The wings will be at right angles. Do you see? The whole house will fit inside that row of cottonwoods. In front of the living-room will be a brick porch twenty feet wide, running from wing to wing, with a vine-covered pergola above it.

"In front of the porch I shall have a lawn, always green, with a fountain in the center of it, and brick walks bordered by flowers. On this knoll by the road will be a hundred-foot flagpole with an American flag flying every day until sunset."

"Of course you'll find it so comfortable, all alone in your forty-yard living room——"

"Why," he interrupted indignantly, "I'm not going to live alone. You'll be there—" And stopped.

He looked deep into her brown eyes before she could turn away and held her gaze while the lovely color rose upward and overflowed her cheeks. His temples pounded as he rose, as if from the depths of a prisoning sea, to a realization of the fact that he loved her—loved her with every breath he drew, with every thought, with every dream and plan. Not as a brother, but as a sweetheart and a husband; and in her eyes he saw his own love mirrored.

Thus it lasted, that breathless look, for perhaps five heart-beats. When it was over, five years of longing by Dick Montgomery were as if they had never been. A castle in the air that he had been five years in building, did he but know it, had crumbled into dust and left no trace behind.

"We're—we're late," said Kitty with a little, soft laugh. "See how low the sun is!"

Straightway she put the huge car to a pace that kept Luke intent on the welfare of scuttering hens, pigs and cows and the safety of passing cars, so he had no time to follow up his bewildering advantage.

DICK MONTGOMERY died hard. On the night following his first fruitless attempt to find the treasure-trove he tried again. More careful pacing from the mesquite near the corral brought him a good two yards short of the nearer lip of the great hole they had dug. The Great Diviner pointed unerringly and undeviatingly down. They worked all night, as they had before, through sand, through adobe, through gravel, into muddy water. Again, when dawn came they quit disheartened, empty-handed. The third night he drove Keeley and California Joe to it, though their ardor had cooled and doubts were openly expressed. Keeley had formulated the theory that a great ore-body lay far below the surface and that it might pay to sink a shaft, for his Great Diviner, he declared, could not register wrongly.

Montgomery told him with a barking curse that he was not interested in gold-mines just them. He wanted the bars reposing in the old coffee-pot; nothing less. They quarreled, more or less violently, when rose crept into the East the third morning, for they were dog-tired and their nerves were strained to the breaking-point by Joe's recurrent "I feel something heavy!"

After the trio of failures the general manager declared a truce and went gloomily back to the Yellow Rainbow. He found that he might as well have stayed away, so far as his mine duties were concerned. The vein was slender and the ore poor. It had been so for months. Workmen, attracted to the Texas and California oil-fields, where big pay was the rule, were hard to get. It needed quantity production to show a good profit and they could not achieve it. The owners of the Yellow Rainbow, in short, had a gold-mine on their hands which seemed determined to prove an animal of another color—a white elephant, in fact.

During the next month, Montgomery went back often to gaze morosely upon his handiwork and to dig two more holes, to the right and left of the straight line of the first three. The result was sickening failure. The prospect holes became a source of pleasure and profit to the small houses surrounding them. Dogs and Mexican children climbed in and out. The water was carried off in buckets as rapidly as it seeped in, to nourish singed garden-plots struggling in the sand.

The activities of Luke Burwell also attracted Montgomery to the vicinity of the old Churchill place. The youth had become an object of vindictive interest. He had a big crew plowing up adobe, mixing and moulding it, and hauling away the dried brick on motor-trucks. The promised wave of adobe popularity had come and was mounting higher and higher, to the evident prosperity of Burwell. The old house was used as a shelter for the crew, and its environs were strewed with browsing burros, wabbly-wheeled wagons and small patched tents. It was a busy and a cheerful scene, efficiently managed, and it bit into Montgomery's heart and left a canker there. He grew to hate the youth and his cheerful energy and good fortune when he balanced against them his ill-usage at the hands of fate. His treasure-trove had become an

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obsession with him, its persistent elusion a cause of bitter grievance.

Luke had so far confined his campaign to removing the earth from a point near the rear of the house to about one-half the length of the corral. He went down as deep as the earth lasted, four to five feet, leaving a great basin behind him as he worked out toward the prospect holes. The walls of the enclosure were left standing until the earth beneath them was needed. Then it was torn down and the old bricks themselves melted up for reshaping with the parent soil.

A fiesta, one Summer's evening, had called all the Mexican hands to the city when Montgomery drove up searching for a clue that might locate the treasure. He had perhaps little hope of finding such clues. But it had become a habit with him to haunt the locality and speculate and pace and prod and even dig a little here and there. He strolled over to the fast-vanishing corral now. Another section of the wall had been sacrificed only that day and the plow had turned more of the hard-packed surface of the corral.

His attention was attracted by a line through the plowed ground. It was as if a path had been beaten there, for the earth broke only in large chunks. His curiosity was aroused and he strolled along this line, which crossed the corral from side to side. It looked as though it might have been a path though it was not of course, because the corral had been open between the walls and without barriers. Stock had trampled over it at will in every direction.

A large piece of earth gave him a hint. One side of it was square, as if it had been moulded. It was part of an adobe brick. It was well out in the center of what had been the corral. The plow had turned it up there. Then this line must have marked a partition or boundary fence through the rectangle, after all.

This idea he dismissed at once. There had never been such a wall or fence through it. He had been familiar with the property for years. There had been no need for a wall. There had been no wall, he repeated again to himself. Then why this line—why——

It came to him with the force of a blow in the face: The corral had been enlarged.

This line marked the spot where the lower, or rear wall of the old corral had stood. When Big John enlarged it as he grew in prosperity, the bricks had been removed and a new rear wall erected, down there, over a hundred feet away. Then——

When Bizco and Tony had stayed here that night after robbing the stage, they had slept in the old or smaller corral. All his measurements consequently had been wrong. He had been groping and delving yards from the real hiding-place of the treasure. It was here—here under his hand waiting for him.

He ran across the plowed earth to where a spade was lying. If his guess was right, the roots of a mesquite tree would be found adjoining the center of this old wall. Mesquite roots, he knew, are usually greater than that part of the shrub which is above ground. If a large mesquite, the upper witness tree of the treasure-trove, had been cut away when the corral was enlarged, then the tough, rot-resisting roots would still be underground.

Measuring carefully with his eye the width of the corral, he plunged the spade furiously in the earth. Within the space of two minutes he had struck something hard. A frantic clearing away proved the correctness of his theory. Here were the roots of the shrub. Standing over them, he sighted carefully toward the rear of the corral. The giant mesquite, he had previously noted, appeared above the rear wall. He knew without pacing that it was the correct distance away—two hundred feet. It was approximately seventy feet, maybe a little more, outside the rear wall. So the treasure was buried in the line formed by the roots and the tree, about twenty feet inside the present rear wall, and one hundred feet from where he stood.

He took a thirty-inch pace habitually. Now, his teeth so prone to chatter with excitement that it was a nervous effort to keep his jaws clenched, he marched straight toward the big mesquite for forty paces, halted, marked the spot by making a deep cross with heel, and set off on a run for his car. In less than fifteen minutes he was at the door of Dr. Keeley. Had either of Phœnix's two crossing policemen possessed the means of overtaking him, he would have been in jail instead, so headlong was his pace through town.

"I'VE got it, Doc!" he cried. "I've got it! We measured wrong—didn't have the right dope. But she's mine now, I tell you! Bring the Diviner and come along before it gets dark. We'll turn 'er out like a hill of potatoes."

But Keeley refused to be stampeded. He put back the lank locks from either side of his face as he rose from the table where he had been eating his supper.

"If you know where the mythical gold is, go dig it up," he advised sourly. "You don't need me nor the Great Diviner."

Montgomery seized him by the arm and shook him in hot impatience.

"Don't be a fool!" he cried. "You know I need the Diviner on it to save a lot of work. I'm playin' the right hunch this time. Come on!"

The man disengaged Montgomery's hand with a certain decisiveness.

"You've made a fool out of me about long

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enough, Montgomery. I've spent the last night out of doors, slushing around in cold water, I'm going to. There never was any buried gold there."

His temper slowly melted out of him and, as the Mexican had a long day before and divers other men since, he recoiled a step. For he noted the phenomenon of the pale eyes growing paler, the thin lips growing into a knife-blade line, the whole body possessed of the fury to kill that set it rigidly as the Gila monster is set before he strikes. Instinctively Keeley threw up his left hand as if to ward a blow, but ended in a gesture of pointing.

Montgomery wheeled to follow the direction of the finger and recognized the Great Diviner in its many-folded wrappings of black silk on the shelf beneath the window. Without a word he turned, took it and left the house. He jerked the door to behind him with such force that the windows rattled.

In driving back he avoided the business section, right-angling to the East. The light was fading swiftly. Even though he drove as though possessed, it was quite dusk when he ran to the spot where he had marked the cross. By bending low he could just distinguish it. Kneeling above it, he held the Diviner in front of him as he had seen Keeley do.

A feeling of superstitious awe came over him as he felt the steel tug and wrench in his grasp. It bent outward and downward until the chamois bag was quite below it. Almost it seemed as if the finger of an unseen giant were pushing it toward a spot a little to the right of the cross he had marked.

He had brought a flashlight from the car. Turning it on, he propped it on a bit of earth so that its rays illumined the spot where he wished to dig. He threw the Diviner aside and seized the spade. Breathing through his open mouth, panting like a dog which has run far, and making grunting noises as he fairly tore the earth away, there was something repulsive about him as he labored. Greed for blood-drenched treasure had bestialized him.

His spade struck something hard. Regardless of his carefully pressed trousers he threw himself on his knees in the loam, clawing the loose soil away with his taloned fingers. Tin, rusted tin, soft as an old glove, that crumbled to flakes under his touch. Beneath it two lumps, symmetrical, hard, heavy—very heavy. He struck them, one against the other, making a rich dull clink. The dirt fell from them. Where the sharp edge of one had marked the other he saw a gleam of reddish yellow—gold! Thirty-two thousand dollars' worth of it, the treasure-trove at last.

"What are you doing here?"

At the low, cold question, he scrambled to his feet instantly, leaving the bars in the hole. And as he stood upright, his automatic was in his right hand. A flashlight the inquisitor held was playing upon him. He knew the voice—young Burwell's.

Hatred for the man who had been murdered for those two ingots fifteen years ago; hatred for his offspring, the deadly hatred that the man who has injured another bears for his victim, overbore caution and policy.

"I've come for my gold!" he answered thickly. "I've got it; I'm going to take it. Make a move to stop me and I'll put eight bullets through your white-livered carcass!"

"You killed the father; you shall not rob the son," said a quiet voice in Spanish on his right.

He turned instinctively. Pietro, who had come up noiselessly, since the plowed ground padded his footsteps, struck him across the forehead with the edge of a spade. Perhaps the memory, still vivid, of the crumpled form of his friend lying face downward in the road near the Sugar Loaf added something of power to the swinging blow.

MONTGOMERY stayed in the hospital for a week. He had a scalp wound that ran diagonally across the bald spot from above the right temple to the left eyebrow. Pietro's offering had also caused a slight concussion of the brain. He was weak and pale and the wound was still bandaged when he crawled unsteadily up the stairs to Homer Sessions' office. The mine lawyer led him to his private room and closed the door. There, tapping his knuckles methodically in order over and over again with his glasses as he sat cross-legged in his chair, he heard Montgomery's bitter, disjointed story through.

"I want my property, Homer," the injured man concluded. "You said this gold was treasure-trove, finders, keepers. I found it and it's mine. If it was the old days I'd go and shoot it out with him. But I suppose the young coward wouldn't fight that way and they'd hang me if I killed him. It's mine and I want it I tell you!"

"I'm sorry to say, Dick, this case isn't on all fours with the hypothetical one you put up to me several weeks ago," said the lawyer, slowly. "A number of elements enter into it which change the premises materially.

"It is true that treasure-trove is property lost and presumably abandoned, long off the premises and out of the possession of the owner. It is also true that property recovered after having been so lost, abandoned and out of the possession and off the premises of the owner can be, I believe, successfully defended by the finder, even though the owner prove it once was his.

"But these bars while lost were not abandoned. They were on Burwell's premises. He acutally has title to that land on which they were buried. The presumption is that in

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course of time, as he extended his excavations for adobe soil, he would have uncovered them. So while they were lost, they were not lost. They were constructively in his possession—his property on his own premises, well, you might say temporarily mislaid. Don't forget they are in his possession now. Under all the peculiar circumstances, possession in this instance is more than the regulation nine points of the law."

One phrase had struck Montgomery.

"His property?" he repeated. "How can they be his property, just because they happened to be buried on his land? You forget he didn't find them. I found them and claimed them before that Greaser, Pietro, walloped me with the spade."

The lawyer looked at him in surprize.

"I thought you knew," he said. "His father was one of the partners in the Little El Dorado stage-line, He held an undivided one-fourth interest. Luke Burwell is the only known heir. In equity and I think in law as well, those bars are his property, any way you consider it."

It was a crushing blow, and Montgomery took it with a painful blinking of his pale gray eyes and a settling and slumping in his chair. Unwittingly the lawyer dealt him what at that moment, was even a shrewder one.

"Too bad I can't give you any hope, Dick," he went on, real sympathy in his voice. "It would be a fine little stake to put you into business for yourself, or to keep you going till you found another job."

"Found what—another job?"

"I forgot you hadn't heard. The board of directors met yesterday and decided to close the mine for good. The Yellow Rainbow has petered out."

THE home of Luke Burwell's dreams has arisen on the Andrews place down the valley. The adobe house with its forty-foot living room is there, and Kitty is in it. But there are some additions that he did not sketch for her.

For instance, the hundred-foot flagpole is surmounted by a curious weather vane, a silhouetted coffee-pot cut from tin. And on the big barn which stands well back from the road is painted "Coffee Pot Ranch. Mr. and Mrs. Luke Burwell." There is also a curly-headed, rosy-cheeked cherub who toddles about the house and lawn, making good progress despite frequent tumbles. He is another Luke Burwell and he bullies both his parents scientifically, despite the fact that he is master of but a half-dozen words. The only discipline he acknowledges is that of Pietro, who is nominally a ranch-hand, but who spends all of the heir's waking hours at young Luke's heels.

The coffee-pot sign has a curious attractiveness. The infrequent Arizona tramps head for the Burwell place as if by instinct. They seem to know that a well-filled coffee-pot is always on the back of the kitchen range and no one ever goes away hungry. The Burwells have a belief that the coffee-pot is their luck sign and they are considerate of it. Automobile parties sometimes mistake the place for an inn, and go away praising the coffee. Kitty humorously complains that Pietro goes into the road and hails them, so he will have some one to listen to his boast about the boy.

THE floating population of the Pacific Coast is not exclusive. It will associate with any one. Its members drift from the Canadian line south toward the turn of Summer, shoving lumber at Grays Harbor, getting out timber in Oregon, giving a hand to the prune crop around San José, harvesting oranges at Redlands, rolling up the beans at Ventura, picking walnuts at Santa Barbara, not above sawing driftwood at San Diego. They sleep in tattered blankets around fragrant eucalyptus fires when the Winter rains do not force them to seek refuge in box-cars.

They are not exclusive, but they object to the presence of that one known indifferently as "Baldy Scar Face" and "White Eye" in their camps. For he suffers from nightmares and he is like to wake up in the bleak hours, two o'clock or three, and shout:

"I didn't kill him, I tell you! I didn't—I didn't!"

And that cry at that hour rouses them, and rouses within them the memory of banished loves and murdered hopes and strangled ideals and dead ambitions, and they lie there miserably until dawn, thinking, thinking.

Why can't he keep his —— mouth shut and leave a feller sleep, they grumble, each to himself, each trying to lay the ghosts of his own sodden and wasted past.

They do not stop to consider, being selfish, that perhaps this man's burden is greater than their own.

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WHEN Michael J. Phillips sent us a story this year he had me guessing. Was Michael J. in California the M. J. Phillips of Michigan who years ago was a member of our writers' brigade? Of course he could easily have moved to California and, less likely, could have changed his exact signature, but we'd been friendly in the old days and it didn't seem likely he'd just fire in a manuscript without even a hello note attached. And, though there'd been years for improvement, Michael J. was a whole lot better writer than M. J. But I looked up M. J.'s signature, identified the two as one and wrote him.

He confessed in his reply that he'd grinned when he sent me the story—wanted to see how long it would take me to recognize him. The old-timers among you will join with me in welcoming him back. And some of you will remember that once we ran "Talks to Readers" by our writers, long talks with headings over 'em instead of the less formal ones we have now. We discontinued the long ones from lack of space, but several of them were left over and were too good to lose, so they have been carefully preserved.

Among them was one by M. J. Phillips. When he appeared as Michael J., I decided you'd agree with me that it was so good that space could go hang. Also it was about the sensations of being under fire in the Spanish War, written before the World War added some new sensations to the experience, and I figured that those of you who'd been in the trenches of Europe would have a particular interest in the Spanish War experience, especially those of you who'd served in both wars.

AND Mr. Phillips has added some later notes to what he wrote somewhere about 1911 or 1912. He lives in Santa Barbara now and puts in part of his time as telegraph editor of the *Daily News*. He was a major for eight or nine years in the Michigan National Guard and served on the Border in 1916. As to the late war he tells me, "I had a half-hour argument with Secretary Baker in which I set forth why I should go with combatant troops, but he won it, which I suppose is fair enough."

Nine or ten years ago the man in charge of the destinies of *Adventure*—the same man who is editor to-day—asked me to write a little something about certain experiences of mine. He had bought some of my stories, which were published in the *Adventure* of that day, and so I obliged. Here it is:

"UNDER fire"—has a sort of promising, suggestive, exciting sound, doesn't it? How many of the *Adventure* readers and writers have been under fire? I don't mean in the figurative sense, in politics or business or friendly argument, but really under fire, with the fellows on yonder hill making as strenuous an effort to "get" you as you are making to "get " them? Well, I have, and the sensations are as suggestive and as exciting as the title indicates.

And then some, to descend to the vernacular. If a man could describe truthfully and fully just what he feels when he hears the bullets fired in anger whistling overhead, he would outrank Shakespeare and Zola and all the rest of the clan. To attempt to set it down in every-day English—why, it's useless, that's all. Either it sounds tame and colorless, or it seems like the wildest imaginings of "Old Sleuth" or "Deadwood Dick."

I "got mine" in 1898 in Cuba. It is thirteen years ago, but the remembrance is as clear and distinct as it was on the first day of July when "Commence firing!" was sounded all along the attacking line. I was in a volunteer regiment, and we were told off to make a demonstration against Fort Aguadores, which was the extreme right of the Spanish fortifications about Santiago. I was considerably under voting age, as were many of my comrades, and we were wild to "get at 'em."

WE HAD landed a few days before at Siboney, which is a harbor a few miles up the coast from Guantanamo, where the Marines made their historic stand, and fired the first shots of the war. Our first camp was in a coconut grove, our second on a sandy plateau above the village. There was a narrow-gage railroad running up the coast from an iron mining town beyond Siboney—Juragua—to Santiago, and the morning of the first we loaded

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into ore-cars and were taken up to within a couple of miles of Aguadores.

We unloaded and formed against the side of the cliff, with a solid wall of rock on one side, and the deep blue sea dashing restlessly almost at our very feet on the other. They called for sharpshooters to go ahead and scout, and five of us from our company—C—were among those to volunteer. We shed our haversacks, blanket rolls and canteens, shifted our cartridge belts, which weighed heavy with the big, old-fashioned .45-70 lead bullets, and started forward.

In perhaps an hour the eighteen volunteers, in charge of a lieutenant, had gained the crest of a hill across the San Juan River from the fortifications. Our hill was perhaps five hundred feet high. On our left was the ocean, with a big warship and three busy little gunboats lying offshore in a wide half-circle. In front and a little to our left was the long-legged bridge which crossed the estuary a quarter of a mile wide, where the San Juan ran down to the sea. This bridge, which bore the railroad tracks, was intact except for a fifty-foot span, where the Spaniards had blown it up with dynamite.

TO GO back a little: We had been warned to "Beware of the bridge!" by the fragment of the fleet that had nosed along up-shore with us. The message was delivered by megaphone from the little *Gloucester,* Commander Richard Wainwright, recently retired, commanding officer. I never knew what seamanship meant till I saw that little cockleshell come dancing in gaily until within half a rifle shot from shore. The surf was thunderous and rolling high; the water was silvered by the foam which surrounded scores of saw-toothed rocks. It did not seem to the landlubbers ashore that a rowboat could pick its way through that deadly tangle; but—hats off to gallant Wainwright—on she came like a fine lady crossing a ballroom floor until a sailor, hanging perilously in the prow, had shouted that the bridge was mined, and dangerous. Then she backed and twisted and dodged her way to open water again.

WELL, to get back to our muttons, and the description of the panorama that was spread out before us. In the left foreground was Fort Aguadores—grim and gray and massive, the colors of Spain hanging limply in the bright morning sunlight from a tall staff all but over the water. The railroad ran through a deep cut between the fort proper and the barracks, evidently burrowed into the hillside. Above on the right, near the military crest of the hill, was a raw yellow rifle-pit, newly dug. Even in our inexperience we knew that was all a bluff; it was too conspicuous. Three of us who lay behind the same log presently discovered a real rifle pit, pretty well masked, and two-thirds of the way down the hill. And our excitement grew when we saw a Spanish soldier standing on the top of this pit, watching the maneuvers of the fleet.

WE DISCUSSED the range in whispers and decided the gentleman, in his blue and white cotton uniform which harmonized perfectly with the vivid landscape, was about 800 yards away. We set the sights, got comfortable positions, and waited for the word. Presently when the troops and the ships were ready the word came.

We fired. Our friend on top of the pit threw up both hands and plunged forward. We traced his fall by tiny white blurs which his hands made, and the arc described by his yellow straw hat. We had all taken careful aim and fired together, to make sure of "getting" him.

How does it feel to kill a man? To tell the truth, one's conscience doesn't seem to be fussed about it at all. My sensations were: Elation over our good aim; satisfaction at having drawn first blood; and a sort of heady excitement and an itching of the trigger-finger. We looked eagerly for another one.

AND then, suddenly and sickeningly, everything changed. They began firing at us!

The first bullet said *P-ss-st!* It didn't seem to be more than six inches from my head. I ducked. Two or three came with that rushing, mysterious, urgent sound. I ducked quickly for each one of them. Then one whined hungrily a good ways over head. But my neck worked automatically for that one, too. Funny thing about bullets. You dodge; that's all there is to it. You may not want to; you may reason to yourself, as I did, that the bullet that you hear is not one that hits you, and the danger is over when it hisses or hums.

But reason and instinct don't couple up. Along comes another, and you pay your usual tribute of respect.

I began to get scared with that first bullet; and the feeling increased for an hour or more. There was nothing pretty about the sensation. It was nauseating, degrading, horrible. One's brain pictured what would happen if one's cringing body stopped a red-hot messenger of death. One's stomach protested sickeningly as though it were alone in an express elevator in a twenty-story building, detached from the rest of the body, but retaining its sensitiveness, and the elevator was running away, up and down, up and down the shaft.

WE FIRED, regularly at first, and then more sparingly. We were armed with black-powder, single-shot Springfields, and a dense cloud of smoke neatly indicated our positions to the Spaniards, who fired high-power Mausers that left no telltale smoke behind; with each discharge of the Springfield, there would be a little cluster of hisses and whines and cracks all about us. The crack came from the passage of the high-power bullet through the air. We didn't know that; we supposed they were firing explosive bullets and that they were breaking to pieces near by.

That added a few more layers to the pyramid of fear. It was bad enough, I thought, to be drilled decently by a bullet that didn't bungle the job. But to stop an explosive, and be torn and rent—Ugh! It was awful.

THE pyramid of panic was yet to come, though we didn't know it. We had noticed a heavily laden ore-car on the track, between the fort and the garrison, at the bottom of the deep cut on the Spaniards' side of the river. No one knew what it meant. But after things had warmed up, a field piece barked, and a shell whistled over our heads. Leaves and branches fell upon us—I forgot to say the hill was heavily wooded—and we all but burrowed into the rocky hill with our fingers. Great ——! Did you hear that? They had big guns—cannons!

Fear had reached the peak. A bullet was bad enough; an explosive bullet was horribly worse;

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ut a shell—a shell that left you a thing of red, ismembered fragments! Oh, they couldn't be ruel enough to try to kill a chap with shells!

We learned later that that first one exploded in he center of a company and tore it to pieces, killng three and mangling a half-dozen others.

I LAY there on the hill, clammy, bathed in cold sweat, deadly sick, firing automatically and carefully when ordered to do so. All the time I saw, not the wild green hillside and the gray fort and the sparkling water and our four ships lying out there, but my home back in the good old United States. I would have given honor, wealth, youth and strength to be back there, up in the hayloft in the barn or under the bed. Those were the two places of refuge that occurred to me. And mixed with that fear that turned my bones to water—the man who first wrote that knew what fear was—was one thought, one shred of satisfaction, one un-Christian, unholy, gloating remembrance: "Well, —— 'em, if they get me in a minute, I got one of them first!"

The bullets kept coming; so did the shells. Luckily for us and unluckily for the poor devils behind us they couldn't get our range. They tilted the piece to get the shells over the ore-car, and that sent the shells over our heads. Occasionally one came low enough to tear a path through the tree-tops and shower us with more wreckage. But we never knew when they were going to discover their mistake, back her up a bit, and rake the face of that hill as one rakes the lawn.

DID you ever hear a shell? The song of the shell is the bloody, relentless, savage spirit of war personified. The boys of '61 tell me they put words to the song: "Which one, which one, which one?"

The sound would strike terror to the very soul of one who did not know what it meant—a visitor from another planet where war is unheard of. It is a whine and a roar and a growl all mixed up. And the old-timers knew what they were about when they claimed the shells said, "Which one?" For there is a stealthy, questing note to it.

Meanwhile our ships had opened up, and by the time they got to hammering Aguadores good, we were over the worst of the fear. Boom! One of those gunboats would roar, with an incredible, deafening explosion; we could see the batlike flitter of the shell in flight, and then a cloud of dirt, a few score branches of trees and a pall of pulverized masonry as the missile exploded. The *New York* lay back of the line, and at irregular intervals, with a racket that rocked the eternal hills, would hurl a great shell into the city of Santiago, six or eight miles away. These big fellows we could see plainly.

STRANGELY enough, my feelings toward our own men on the war vessels were almost as bitter as toward the Spaniards. There they were, comfortably out at sea, in no danger of being hurt—the Spaniards devoted all their attention to us—merely indulging in target practise, while any minute we might be snuffed out. I witnessed the incident, now historic, where one of the gunboats signaled for permission to take a wallop at the Spanish flag. "Three tries," said the commanding officer aboard the *New York*. I suspect he was a gentleman of sporting proclivities.

The first shell struck at the base of the staff, and we looked out in astonishment as the roll of cheers from the fleet came out to us. The second missile tore a strip out of the barred red and yellow. We cheered with the jackies at that.

Everybody stopped what he was doing to watch and wait. Even the Spaniards let that accursed field piece cool for a bit.

Boom! and we all yelled madly. The flagstaff quivered, swayed, and fell into the sea!

MY DELIGHT in the feat was tempered by a fierce hatred for a jackie on board the gunboat from which the shells had sped. Clad all in white, he sat on the rail, smoking. As the gunboat let go each time, the vessel rolled from the explosion until first one rail and then the other was all but in the water. My enemy seemed about to wet his feet with each alternate dip. When the staff came crashing down, he snatched off his white canvas hat with one hand and jerked the pipe from his mouth with the other, to wave them wildly above his head.

"Yell, you double-dashed idiot, you!" I gritted. "If you were up here, dodging bullets, you wouldn't be so blamed enthusiastic." That a man could sit there, carefree and placid, and applaud a good shot as he would applaud an act that pleased him in the theater, while I was in mortal danger, struck me as the height of effrontery. Even yet I am surprized at the resentment that surges over me as I think of that saucy tar.

I THINK that it was about at this time that the fear began to subside. I analyzed my feelings a bit afterwards—and ever since I have had the most profound respect for public opinion. Had I been alone, I would have scuttled away like a rabbit. But when the thought of retreat occurred to me up there, I knew it was impossible. It was utterly out of the question. "What would they say back home if I ran away?" I asked myself, and buckled to it, perspiring coldly, firing when ordered to do so, scared sick, but sticking to my job—because public opinion wouldn't let me do anything else.

The man next to me rolled over just then, with a surprized, silly smile. He was from another company, a bunch of "rookies" we called them because they were not National Guardsmen but had been recruited for the war. We patronized and bothered them. "Well," I demanded impatiently, "what's the matter with you?"

"Why—I'm shot," he said, still with that smile. He was. The bullet had ripped through his gunstock and through his leg. "What'll I do?"

"Can you crawl?"

"Yes, sure."

"Well, crawl," I said. "Don't stand up either. They've cut away the brush along the path and have the range on this hill. You crawl or slide, down to the bottom. Do you want me to go with you?"

"Naw," he said carelessly, "I can make it."

I was glad of the answer; I was afraid of getting plugged going down that cut-over path; and, to my intense surprize, there was another feeling. I didn't want to quit my post. I was still afraid, but the fear had pulled its ugly head back into its scales a little further. I was master of it now.

WE STAYED up there eight hours, and I came down with one regret. A spent bullet whined past me as we retreated stoopingly to the path, and stuck in a sapling—just stuck there. Another

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man from my company was a step ahead of me, and got that Mauser bullet. He wears it on his watch chain. I think a hundred dollars would be a small price for that bullet.

Into our little ore-cars we piled again and were chugged back to Siboney. We were white-faced, and weary beyond belief; and our hands trembled as if we were palsied. But a great change had taken place in us. We had gone to the front boys—eager, thoughtless boys. We came back with just a suspicion of a swagger. We had faced death, and were men. We had been under fire, and had taken our part in the heat and the dust of the day. We were of the tumult and the shouting. We had seen history made and helped to make it. We had been *under fire!*

Here is the later word added by Captain Phillips:

Santa Barbara, California.

HOW thin and pale and weak that experience must seem to the men who went through the hell of the Argonne or Château-Thierry only a few short months ago! But it was real and vivid to me then. And though the Spanish War wasn't much of a brawl, measured by modern standards, the death-rate per capita was just as high as any in history: Precisely one per individual.

Speaking of the world war, I am thinking seriously of organizing a society or two on account of it. The one that looms largest in my thoughts will be called The Order of Those Who Almost Got Across.

I was a captain in the Air Service. I accepted my commission from a personal friend on the express understanding that I was to go overseas—quickly. I went to Camp Sevier, South Carolina, and was there put in command of a battalion of troops, a thousand of them, with overseas orders in my pocket. We went down to Garden City together and for a month they were the joy of my heart. I liked them, and I think they liked me. We soldiered together and won various compliments, deserved by them, for cleanliness and soldierly ability and discipline and willingness.

AND then came an order transferring me to Washington, and they went over without me. They professed to think at Washington that I had had administrative experience. I drew a nice golden-oak desk, a stenographer, a wire waste-basket and a filing-cabinet. And there I stayed until the war was over and three months besides. Most of the time I was company neither for man nor beast.

Service on this side was not without its compensations and excitements. There was the time when I unmasked and arrested the man who talked like a German spy, and may only have been an infernal fool. There was the other time when we went up in a free balloon and escaped death by drowning only to have the big gasbag explode over our heads, and we escaped death by burning, all in the same afternoon. There were various other occasions when I took responsibility and bought and sold and decided and ordered on my own, while hardened regulars, caught in the meshes of red tape, sat back and wondered in awe. But I was only a reserve officer, so my file in Personnel in Washington meant nothing in the future, and theirs did. It was great stuff if you didn't weaken, there in Washington.

THE other organization I propose to effect some day is the Society of Those Who Almost Got Promoted. My file of papers, recommending a majority, were in the Adjutant-General's Office with a few thousand others when the armistice was signed. I will never be able to decide whether the blamed war stopped too soon or not soon enough.

I am living in California, now, and spend a good many afternoons trying to make a golf ball go where you aim it. Usually it doesn't, but when it does—oh, man! Ain't it a grand and glorious feelin'?—MICHAEL J. PHILLIPS.

And that Jackie on the gunboat that got the Spanish flag, is he by any chance sitting around our Camp-Fire? If so, please come forward. All is forgiven.

IT'S proved. I've always maintained that Americans are just as good liars as Australians, New Zealanders or any other darned people. Remember the cheerful ones an Australian comrade handed us some time ago? Read this:

Chicago, Illinois.

In reading over Camp-Fire I was much amused at incidents E. Read, Esq., states to show how intelligent the dogs of Australia are.

While I do not, for one moment, wish to have it thought that the Australian dog is not the smartest canine in all the world, I nevertheless wish to show that there are other dogs in this world which also have some sense of reasoning. I am referring here to the dogs encountered in some parts of the Philippine Islands.

IN CERTAIN rivers of the Philippines there are numerous crocodiles; and that crocodiles are very fond of dog-meat is a thing that has been found out long ago by the Philippine canine. That dogs are in the habit of crossing rivers, much for the same reason that the proverbial hen crosses the road, is a fact which the crocodile has learned.

But here is where the wise dog wisdom comes in. The dog knows that every time he crosses a river he runs the risk of being snapped up by a crocodile. He also knows that the crocodile is so greedy and anxious that the mere bark will draw the crocodiles, even as a dinner-bell the farm hands. Mr. Dog therefore, when he has found the place where he wishes to cross the river, runs along the bank away from this place and when he is quite a distance away he sets up a most unearthly howl.

Immediately the news that a dog is on the bank is voiced throughout the crocodile colony and immediately they all proceed hither in anticipation of one grand mouthful. When Mr. Dog is certain that all the crocodiles from the neighborhood are gathered before him, he, quick as a wink, turns tail, runs to the place selected for crossing and is on the other side before the disappointed crocodiles are really aware that they have lost a titbit.

IT HAS also come to my knowledge that in certain instances where Mr. Dog has a number of polite and accommodating dog friends, that these dog friends will do the barking so that Mr. Dog can cross the river in perfect safety and ease.

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I have been further informed, on good authority, hat, in a number of instances where the dogs have been so well acquainted with the woods that they new almost every tree, when Mr. Dog was alone nd in a great hurry to cross the river he would leap nto the river and swim to the other side while the rees barked excessively.

Maybe the readers of the Camp-Fire have been n the Philippines and can substantiate the above tatements.—O. HANSEN.

AS YOU see, there's quite a good deal of fact behind Ferdinand Berthoud's story n this issue:

Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The story isn't exactly what you'd call a story, hough. I simply wrote down a sequence of real appenings just as I'd write a letter. The Maxim Iotel is real; Jack Moore was the man's real name, ut as he's successfully kicked the bucket years ago hat doesn't matter much. The captain was real— Captain Windley, who marked out the line of lemarcation between Damaraland and Bechuana-and. Even the eye-glass was real and was not ffected. Incidentally I never have been able to nderstand why custom should ridicule a man who ad the nerve to wear one eye-glass when only one ye was bad instead of wearing two.

The sale by auction of the four women was a real appening too, and quite a usual one. When I ad got that far with the writing I was at a loss to now how to give the story the necessary twist to nd it up so just finished it in the quick way as you ead. Little though the amount of love was that put into it, I felt somewhat ashamed of even that. A fellow who was in the interior of Africa "on his wn" when he was barely seventeen years old may e sentimental enough to bust but he hates to how it.—FERDINAND BERTHOUD.

AN ACCOUNT of the killing of Billy the Kid from one who was practically an eye-witness:

Frisco, Colorado.

I have been reading a lot of accounts of the killing f "Billy the Kid." Will try and give you the traight of it, as I remember it pretty clearly al-hough it is a long while ago.

I WAS riding for the Holt outfit and was down to Pete Maxwell's looking for horses. I was water-ng my string just about daylight when Billy rode round the corral. He was all in. They were hunt-ng him all over —— and back. His gang was pretty vell busted up and the Kid was hiking for the Pan-handle where there was a bunch of bad ones hiding ut.

The Kid was plum tuckered out, so was his pony, nd he felt safe for a little while at Maxwell's. Maxwell knew Billy and carted out a couple of Mexican women to get breakfast. Some folks said Maxwell sent word to Garrett that Billy was at the anch, but don't you believe it, for Billy wasn't at Pete's place an hour before Garrett came over the livide north of the ranch. He kept the out-building between him and the houses, let his pony in the orral and crawled around the house to the front. He listened a minute and could hear Billy and Pete alking and was sure they were not looking for nybody.

PAT pushed open the door and stood for a second, for the room was kind of dark yet. Billy didn't know Garrett and pulled a gun, asking Pete, "*¿Quien est está?*" twice. Before Maxwell could say a word Pat fired. Maxwell bolted through a door at the back of the room and over the corral fence. Garrett didn't wait, but ran around the corner of the house and behind the well where he crouched down with his gun over the curb waiting to see if Billy would show up. After waiting about fifteen minutes Pat hollered to old Mother Rimoldi, an old Mexican woman, and gave her some money to go and see if Billy was in the room. She pushed open the front door, gave a look and beckoned to Pat.

Billy was sitting on the floor, his back against the door Pete had run out of, with a gun in each hand, dead. He had dragged himself across the room after he was shot, so he could guard the front door.

If Pat hadn't beat it the Kid would likely got him. He could have killed Pat if he hadn't waited to see who he was. The Kid was a bad *hombre*, but Garrett was sure leary of him and didn't take a chance.

WAYNE BRAZEL, a rancher about twenty-three years old, killed Pat Garrett last of April, 1908 or '09.

Dudley Garrett, Pat's son, filed information charging Brazel with murder at Las Cruces N. M. Brazel got bail and I left there that Summer and I never knew what was done to him.—B. W.

THE San Blas Indians and their country have always seemed to me to hold particular interest. Especially the question of how many white men have ever succeeded in crossing that bit of the Isthmus. Here is something from our comrade of "A.A." and our writers' brigade, E. E. Harriman:

Los Angeles.

I see that the San Blas country is under discussion again. Well, I am very well acquainted with another "sole and only" who has been across the San Blas country. Al Corson was for years a freight-train conductor and was the big man in a wreck in the Royal Gorge, where a member of his crew was pinned down by the feet, with a big boiler on the bank above him, ready to roll him flat at a little jostle. Al built up a pair of skids that held the boiler well above the victim, rolled the boiler over him into the river and chopped the man free at his leisure. And the guy was practically unhurt.

LATER in life Al and a pard, Jack, were desirous of crossing the San Blas country. They had a mule who was unusually averse to braying and they had reason to be thankful. They entered a pass and climbed quietly. At the crest they saw two Indians asleep under a low tree and went past, holding their breath. The mule never said a word.

Farther on they found a young buck across a big rock, nearly dead from loss of blood. He had chopped a big hole in his instep with a machete in cutting a big, tough vine. They stopped the blood, bound up his wound and heaved him up on the mule, after dosing him with a stiff jolt of aromatic spirits of ammonia.

After plodding for several miles they saw a village and they were seen even sooner, for here came a motley throng, armed with bows, clubs, spears and

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primitive muzzle-loading guns. Al punched the young buck and told him to "sit up and *hablar* to these folks. Tell 'em what we did for you, *paisano*."

The gang met them and one old warrior, who sported ten thousand wrinkles to the square foot, lowered a long-bladed spear in an effort to learn how far it was through a white man anyhow. Al gave the buck another poke and yelped at him rather sharply. He sat up groggily, waved one hand while he braced with the other, and said half a dozen words that sounded like a cow with a turnip in her throat. The gang turned into an escort of honor at once.

THOSE two boys traveled to the village in state, and the chief, who proved to be the father of the slashed boy, gave them everything he could think of in the way of accommodations, sent a runner ahead to the next village, which passed the word on in a sort of "fiery cross" style. Al and Jack passed through the entire country and came out on the hither side, feasted, escorted in honor, petted and made much of.

If any one of *Adventure's* readers wishes to know more about this, let him write to Al Corson, Calexico, California. The last I heard of him he was in the train dispatcher's office there. He told me this yarn while I was in his room in this city, three years ago. He said that he was allowed absolute freedom to roam at will among the old villages and through the woods, but the chief sent an escort of two men with him everywhere, because, as he said, "I know you, but others don't."

When they met a strange native the escort talked to him and the stranger promptly bowed to Al and moved on, satisfied. There you have it, as it was told to me.— E. E. HARRIMAN.

WHEN I first read Harold Lamb's story, "The Masterpiece of Death," in the Mid-Sept., issue my brain was shipwrecked on the mixture of "thag," "thug," "thuggi," "thaggi." So I wrote Mr. Lamb for help and here's his reply. I admit I passed the buck to Mr. Noyes as to whether we'd use an "a" or a "u." I refused to look at those words again and don't even know which he chose.

You see, any magazine has to adopt one system of spelling and stick to it, despite awkward exceptions that will arise under any system. We happen to use the Standard Dictionary in this office and now and then the spellings grieve Mr. Lamb (and others).

How come? Highbinders and gunmen are called "thugs" in this country. We derived the word from England, *via* India where a curious assassin-robber fraternity called itself thags (singular, thag). The cult or science of the murderers is known as thaggi, just as the cult of masons is known as masonry. (The word thuggi was a slip on my part.)

If you must give the Standard its pound of flesh, spell 'em thug, thugs and thuggi. The "a" I think is correct, if you look on the word as a quotation from the native language. That's just what it is—in the story.

But if we spell thag "thug" we should write Jagannath as "Juggernaut." As to this last, I've seen it spelled at least twelve ways by the authorities. Why not write down all the variations, put 'em in a hat on separate slips of paper and let the foreman of the composing-room draw one?—HAROLD LAMB.

IN HOT weather I seem to make more mistakes than usual. And I can make enough in zero weather. The following, written by Mr. Lamb for you of Camp-Fire, should of course have appeared with "The Bride of Jagannath" in our First August issue. It was my mistake that did it. Here, too, there is a reference to the vexed question of spelling.

I think we all have an idea that the Hindus were and are accustomed to throw themselves under the wheels of the car of Jagannath, to be crushed to death. I had. But the idea seems to be as wrong as our way of spelling Jagannath—Juggernaut.

The British officials in the Orissa sector investigated the matter and found that deaths of worshipers under the wheels of the giant car were limited to two or three a year, at the annual festival. And these victims were usually very sick men who chose this way of ending their misery, believing, of course, that such an end would be blessed.

And many hundreds—in fact, several thousands, if the records are to be believed—died annually at these festivals. They perished from want, hunger and thirst; from the pressure of the crowd about the car. The most devout gave all their available possessions to the priests of Jagannath at the temple, saving nothing to utilize on their return journey.

Also, these Hindus gave more than they had. That is, they signed bonds to make over their homes, farms or houses and goods to the priests. These bonds were invariably honored, even if the signer died of want on the home journey.

AS TO Vishnu worship, as exhibited in the festivals of Jagannath, there are two sides to the picture. Most religions have these two sides. The one we know best is the Siva worship, the shrine devoted to the All-Destroyer, the god that is best pleased by the sight of blood. Here we have the words of the apostle Vallabha Swami urging pleasure and luxury and the abandonment to the senses, just as we have Epicurus, and perhaps certain abbots of monastic orders of another age.

Turning the picture over, we see the gosain Chaitanya and read his splendid words that "life is the gift of God." This worshiper of the brighter Vishnu held that sanctity was gained by "warrior ascetics" through privation and self-denial, that all religions can save man's spirits by *bahkt*—faith.

Yet in the temple of Jagannath food was offered at intervals throughout the day to the lips of the grotesque wooden gods, and then eaten—or rather the best of it was eaten—by the priests. Jagannath also was outfitted with false arms and a nose and various garments for his yearly appearance in public. And this half-trunk of wood, ornamented with an extensive wardrobe and preceded by naked woman worshipers, was the deity of the car who cost the lives of thousands of men a year. Such is the strength of a traditional idea.

In "The Bride of Jagannath" there are two men from the opposite sides of the picture. The ritual of the bride, and the hideous means by which the prophecy was voiced through her is substantially as it existed in the early seventeenth century—and later. It is taking a liberty—as members of the Camp-Fire

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who are acquainted with Benares know—to place the car festival in one of the minor temples of the northern districts, but the festival, whether with the car or not, was held in these places.

CONTRIBUTIONS to the Bull Dog Lake Public Library are now in order. And if the spirit back of all libraries (and back of all our public and semi-public institutions) were like the spirit back of the B. D. L. P. Library this continent would be a whole lot better place to live in.

Winnipeg, Man.

Last Summer up on Bulldog Lake, in the Rice Lake gold-mining district of Manitoba, Canada, I made camp at the head of the lake. There was an old lard-pail, tightly covered, hanging on a bush in plain sight, at the beginning of the portage. I was curious and, on removing the cover of the pail, found a four months' old copy of *Adventure* with a note reading:

> NOTICE. This is the Bull Dog Lake Public Library. Please read, replace, recover, and hang up for the next fellow.
>
> BILL REDSOLVE.

Several other names had been written on the cover by prospectors who had read, so I sat up in my tent 'most all night reading, signed my name, and restored the magazine to the can, together with another and later issue taken from my own pack. So now we have two books in our library.—A. I. MACNAMEE.

LOOKING AHEAD FOR DEMOCRACY

IN THESE days of politics and platforms, of bickerings and greed and betrayals, of class selfishness and hatred, of party before country, of new -isms not understood and of old principles forgot, we who believe in the democracy as yet so imperfectly realized listen for a voice to lead us out of our wilderness. Perhaps the silence that greets us is in itself the answer, telling us that we have had our Voice and have not heeded it, telling us, the living, to listen once again and with a more understanding and earnest heart to the undying Voice of the dead.

That voice gave us in ten simple words the final and exact definition of democracy, to serve as our touchstone in doubt, our unfailing guide in perplexity, the test of the rightness of our building. Perhaps it is because those ten words are as simple in meaning as they are satisfying to the senses that we have made of them a bit of empty oratory, an easy catch-word to drug our thought and actions, and have ceased to understand that they are the acid test of every law and custom, of each building and each tearing down.

THERE, Americans, in those ten words, is the democracy we seek. If we had lived those words we should not now face the penalties of our careless sins and easy omissions. If we turned back to them even now, making them practical realities in the humdrum of every-day affairs, there would be no need of worry over our path into the future. We have pattered his words into nothingness, betrayed them into a mockery. But in our hearts we still believe. Let us look into our hearts.

Listen again to the voice of the greatest American.

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. *It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.*"

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

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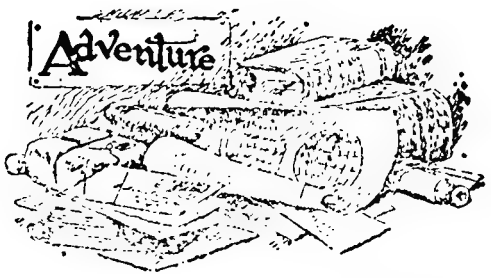

VARIOUS PRACTICAL SERVICES FREE TO ANY READER

THESE services of *Adventure* are free to *any one*. They involve much time, work and expense on our part, but we offer them gladly and ask in return only that you *read and observe the simple rules*, thus saving needless delay and trouble for you and us. The whole spirit of this magazine is one of friendliness. No formality between editors and readers. Whenever we *can* help you we're ready and willing to try.

Identification Cards

Free to any reader. Just send us (1) your name and address, (2) name and address of party to be notified, (3) a stamped and self-addressed return envelope.

Each card bears this inscription, each printed in English, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Dutch, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Japanese:

"In case of death or serious emergency to bearer, address serial number of this card, care of *Adventure*, New York, stating full particulars, and friends will be notified."

In our office, under each serial number, will be registered the name of bearer and of one or two friends, with permanent address of each. No name appears on the card. Letters will be forwarded to friend, unopened by us. Names and addresses treated as confidential. We assume no other obligations. Cards not for business identification. Cards furnished free *provided stamped and addressed envelope accompanies application*. We reserve the right to use our own discretion in all matters pertaining to these cards.

Metal Cards—For twenty-five cents we will send you, *post-paid*, the same card in aluminum composition, perforated at each end. Enclose a self-addressed return envelope, but no postage. Twenty-five cents covers everything. Give same data as for pasteboard cards. Holders of pasteboard cards can be registered under both pasteboard and metal cards if desired, but old numbers can not be duplicated on metal cards. If you no longer wish your old card, destroy it carefully and notify us, to avoid confusion and possible false alarms to your friends registered under that card.

A moment's thought will show the value of this system of card-identification for any one, whether in civilization or out of it. Remember to furnish stamped and addressed envelope and to *give in full the names and addresses of self and friend or friends when applying*.

If check or money order is sent, please make it out to the Ridgway Company, *not* to any individual.

Missing Friends or Relatives

Our free service department "Lost Trails" in the pages following, though frequently used in cases where detective agencies, newspapers, and all other methods have failed, or for finding people long since dead, has located a very high percentage of those inquired for. Except in case of relatives, inquiries from one sex to the other are barred.

Back Issues of *Adventure*

The Boston Magazine Exchange, 109 Mountfort St., Boston, Mass., can supply Adventure *back through* 1918, *and occasional copies before that.*

WILL SELL: Jan., Feb., May, Nov., 1911. May, Nov., Dec., 1913. Feb., March, May, Nov., 1914. Nov., 1916. Feb., March, April, June, First Nov. 1917.—Address FREEMAN SIMPSON, Box 271, Waterville, Maine.

WILL SELL: Mid-Nov., 1919, Mid-Jan., First Feb., Mid-Feb., First March 1920. Fifty cents plus postage.—Address CHRISTOPHER GORDON ENNIS, 344 Willow St., Waterbury, Conn.

Expeditions and Employment

While we should like to be of aid in these matters, experience has shown that it is not practicable.

Manuscripts

Glad to look at any manuscript. We have no "regular staff" of writers. A welcome for new writers. *It is not necessary to write asking to submit your work.*

When submitting a manuscript, if you write a letter concerning it, enclose it *with* the manuscript; do *not* send it under separate cover. Enclose stamped and addressed envelope for return. All manuscripts should be typewritten double-spaced, with wide margins, not rolled, name and address on first page. We assume no risk for manuscripts or illustrations submitted, but use all due care while they are in our hands. Payment on acceptance.

We want only clean stories. Sex, morbid, "problem," psychological and supernatural stories barred. Use almost no fact-articles. Can not furnish or suggest collaborators. Use fiction of almost any length; under 3000 welcomed.

Mail Address and Forwarding Service

This office, assuming no responsibility, will be glad to act as a forwarding adress for its readers or to hold mail till called for, provided necessary postage is supplied. Unclaimed mail which we have held for a long period is listed on the last page of this issue.

Camp-Fire Buttons

To be worn on lapel of coat by members of Camp-Fire—any one belongs who wishes to. Enameled in dark colors representing earth, sea and sky, and bears the numeral 71—the sum of the letters of the word Camp-Fire valued according to position in the alphabet. Very small and inconspicuous. Designed to indicate the common interest which is the only requisite for membership in Camp-Fire and to enable members to recognize each other when they meet in far places or at home. Twenty-five cents, post-paid, anywhere.

When sending for the button enclose a strong, self-addressed, *un*stamped envelope.

If check or money order is sent, please make it out to the Ridgway Company, *not* to any individual.

General Questions from Readers

In addition to our free service department "Ask Adventure" on the pages following, *Adventure* can sometimes answer other questions within our general field. When it can, it will. Expeditions and employment excepted.

Addresses

Order of the Restless—Organizing to unite for fellowship all who feel the wanderlust. First suggested in this magazine, though having no connection with it aside from our friendly interest. Address WAYNE EBERLY, 519 Citizens Bldg., Cleveland, Ohio.

Camp-Fire—Any one belongs who wishes to.

Rifle Clubs—Address Nat. Rifle Ass'n of America, 1108 Woodward Bldg., Washington, D. C.

(*See also under "Standing Information" in "Ask Adventure."*)

Remember: Magazines are made up ahead of time. Allow for two or three months between sending and publication.

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Ask Adventure

A Free Question and Answer Service Bureau of Information on Outdoor Life and Activities Everywhere and Upon the Various Commodities Required Therein. Conducted for *Adventure* Magazine by Our Staff of Experts.

QUESTIONS should be sent, not to this office, but direct to the expert in charge of the department in whose field it falls. So that service may be as prompt as possible, he will answer you by mail direct. But he will also send to us a copy of each question and answer, and from these we shall select those of most general interest and publish them each issue in this department, thus making it itself an exceedingly valuable standing source of practical information. Unless otherwise requested inquirer's name and town are printed with question; street numbers not given.

When you ask for *general* information on a given district or subject the expert will probably give you some valuable general pointers and refer you to books or to local or special sources of information.

Our experts will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their departments subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assumes any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible. These experts have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but for their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a given commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

1. **Service free to anybody, provided stamped and addressed envelope is enclosed. Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries will please enclose International Reply Coupons, purchasable at any post-office, and exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union.**
2. **Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular department whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.**
3. **No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.**
4. **Make your questions definite and specific. State exactly your wants, qualifications and intentions. Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.**
5. **Send no question until you have read very carefully the exact ground covered by the particular expert in whose department it seems to belong.**

1. ★ Islands and Coasts
CAPTAIN A. E. DINGLE, Hamilton, Bermuda. Islands of Indian and Atlantic oceans; the Mediterranean; Cape Horn and Magellan Straits. Ports, trade, peoples, travel. (*Postage 5 cents.*)

2. The Sea Part 1
BERIAH BROWN, Seattle Press Club, 1309 Fifth Ave., N. E., Seattle, Wash. Covering ships, seamen and shipping; nautical history, seamanship, navigation, yachting; commercial fisheries of North America; marine bibliography of U. S.; seafaring on fishing-vessels of the North Atlantic and Pacific banks, small-boat sailing, and old-time shipping and seafaring.

3. ★ The Sea Part 2
CAPTAIN A. E. DINGLE, Hamilton, Bermuda. Such questions as pertain to the sea, ships and men local to the British Empire should be sent to Captain Dingle, not Mr. Brown. (*Postage 5 cents.*)

4. Eastern U. S. Part 1
RAYMOND S. SPEARS, Little Falls, N. Y. Covering Mississippi, Ohio, Tennessee, Michigan and Hudson valleys; Great Lakes, Adirondacks, Chesapeake Bay; river, lake and road travel, game, fish and woodcraft; furs, freshwater pearls, herbs; and their markets.

5. Eastern U. S. Part 2
HAPSBURG LIEBE, 6 W. Concord Ave., Orlando, Florida. Covering Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and N. and S. Carolina, Florida and Georgia except Tennessee River and Atlantic seaboard. Hunting, fishing, camping; logging, lumbering, sawmilling, saws.

6. Eastern U. S. Part 3
DR. G. E. HATHORNE, 44 Central Street, Bangor, Maine. Covering Maine; fishing, hunting, canoeing, guides, outfits, supplies.

7. Middle Western U. S. Part 1
JOSEPH MILLS HANSON (lately Capt. A. E. F.), care *Adventure*. Covering the Dakotas, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Hunting, fishing, travel, *Especially* early history of Missouri Valley.

8. Middle Western U. S. Part 2
JOHN B. THOMPSON, 906 Pontiac Bldg., Chicago, Ill. Covering Missouri, Arkansas and the Missouri Valley up to Sioux City, Iowa. Wilder countries of the Ozarks, and swamps; hunting, fishing, trapping, farming, mining and range lands; big timber sections.

9. Middle Western U. S. Part 3
LARRY ST. JOHN, 1101 Kimball Bldg., Chicago, Ill. Covering Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Lake Michigan. Fishing, hunting, trapping, lumbering, canoeing, camping, guides, outfits, motoring, agriculture, minerals, natural history, clamming, early history, legends.

10. Western U. S. Part 1
E. E. HARRIMAN, 2303 W. 23rd St., Los Angeles, Calif. Covering California, Oregon, Washington, Utah, Nevada, Arizona. Game, fur, fish; camp, cabin; mines, minerals; mountains.

11. Western U. S. Part 2 and Mexico Part 1 Northern
J. W. WHITEAKER, 1505 W. 10th St., Austin, Texas. Covering Texas, Oklahoma, and the border States of old Mexico: Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas. Minerals, lumbering, agriculture, travel, customs, topography, climate, natives, hunting, history, industries.

12. Mexico Part 2 Southern
EDGAR YOUNG, care *Adventure* magazine, Spring and Macdougal Sts., New York, N. Y. Covering that part of Mexico lying south of a line drawn from Tampico to Mazatlan. Mining, agriculture, topography, travel, hunting, lumbering, history, natives, commerce.

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Return postage not required from U. S. or Canadian soldiers, sailors or marines in service outside the U. S., its possessions, or Canada

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13. ★ North American Snow Countries Part 1
S. E. SANGSTER ("Canuck"), L. B. 393, Ottawa, Canada. Covering Height of Land and northern parts of Quebec and Ontario (except strip between Minn. and C. P. R'y); southeastern parts of Ungava and Keewatin. Trips for sport, canoe routes, big game, fish, fur; equipment; Summer, Autumn and Winter outfits; Indian life and habits; Hudson's Bay Co. posts; minerals, timber; customs regulations. No questions answered on trapping for profit.

14. North American Snow Countries Part 2
HARRY M. MOORE, Deseronto, Ont. Covering southeastern Ontario and the lower Ottawa Valley. Fishing, hunting, canoeing, mining, lumbering, agriculture, topography, travel, camping.

15. ★ North American Snow Countries Part 3
GEORGE L. CARON, Gravenhurst, Muskoka, Ont., Canada. Covering southern Ontario and Georgian Bay. Fishing, hunting, trapping, canoeing.

16. North American Snow Countries Part 4
ED. L. CARSON, Burlington, Wash. Covering Yukon, British Columbia and Alberta including Peace River district; to Great Slave Lake. Outfits and equipment, guides, big game, minerals, forest, prairie; travel; customs regulations.

17. North American Snow Countries Part 5
THEODORE S. SOLOMONS, 2837 Fulton St., Berkeley, Calif. Covering Alaska. Arctic life and travel; boats, packing, back-packing; traction, transport, routes; equipment, clothing, food; physics, hygiene; mountain work.

18. North American Snow Countries. Part 6
H. S. BELCHER, The Hudson's Bay Company, Ft. Alexander, Manitoba, Canada. Covering Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Mackenzie and Northern Keewatin. Homesteading, mining, hunting, trapping, lumbering and travel.

19. North American Snow Countries Part 7
JAS. F. B. BELFORD, Richmond, Quebec. Covering New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and southeastern Quebec. Hunting, fishing, lumbering, camping, trapping, auto and canoe trips, history, topography, farming, homesteading, mining, paper and wood-pulp industries, land grants, water-power.

20. Hawaiian Islands and China
F. J. HALTON, 632 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. Covering customs, travel, natural history, resources, agriculture, fishing, hunting.

21. Central America
EDGAR YOUNG, care *Adventure* magazine, Spring and Macdougal Sts., New York, N. Y. Covering Canal Zone, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, British Honduras, Salvador, Guatemala. Travel, customs, language, game, local conditions, minerals, trading.

22. South America. Part 1
EDGAR YOUNG, care *Adventure* magazine, Spring and Macdougal Sts., New York, N. Y. Covering Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Chile; geography, inhabitants, history, industries, topography, minerals, game, languages, customs.

23. South America. Part 2
P. H. GOLDSMITH, *Inter-American Magazine*, 407 West 117th St., New York, N. Y. Covering Venezuela, the Guianas, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and Argentine Republic. Travel, history, customs, industries, topography, natives, languages, hunting and fishing.

24. Asia, Southern
GORDON MCCREAGH, 21 East 14th St., New York City. Covering Red Sea, Persian Gulf, India, Tibet, Burma, western China, Siam, Andamans, Malay States, Borneo, the Treaty Ports; hunting, trading, traveling.

25. Philippine Islands
BUCK CONNOR, Box 807A, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, N. M. Covering history, natives, topography, customs, travel, hunting, fishing, minerals, agriculture, exports and imports, manufacturing.

26. Japan
GRACE P. T. KNUDSON, Castine, Maine. Covering Japan; commerce, politics, people, customs, history, geography, travel, agriculture, art, curios.

27. Russia and Eastern Siberia
MAJOR A. M. LOCHWITZKY (formerly Lieut.-Col. I. R. A., Ret.), Austin, Texas. Covering Petrograd and its province; Finland, northern Caucasus; Primorsk District, Island of Sakhalien; travel, hunting, fishing; explorations among native tribes; markets, trade, curios.

28. Africa Part 1
THOMAS S. MILLER, Carmel, Monterey Co., Calif. Covering the Gold, Ivory and Fever Coasts of West Africa, the Niger River from the delta to Jebba, Northern Nigeria. Canoeing, labor, trails, trade, expenses, outfitting, flora; tribal histories, witchcraft, savagery.

29. Africa Part 2
GEORGE E. HOLT, Frederick, Md. Covering Morocco; travel, tribes, customs, history, topography, trade.

30. ★ Africa Part 3 Portuguese East Africa
R. W. WARING, Corunna, Ontario, Canada. Covering trade, produce, climate, opportunities, game, wild life, travel, expenses, outfits, health, etc.

31. ★ Africa Part 4. Transvaal, N. W. and Southern Rhodesia, British East Africa, Uganda and the Upper Congo
CHARLES BEADLE, Care Society of Authors and Composers, Central Buildings, Tothill St., Westminster, London, England. Covering geography, hunting, equipment, trading, climate, mining, transport, customs, living conditions, witchcraft, opportunities for adventure and sport. (*Postage 5 cents.*)

32. ★ New Zealand and the South Sea Islands
TOM L. MILLS, *The Feilding Star*, Feilding, New Zealand. Covering New Zealand, Cook Islands and Samoa. Travel, history, customs; opportunities for adventurers, explorers and sportsmen. (*Postage 5 cents.*)

33. ★ Australia and Tasmania
ALBERT GOLDIE, Hotel Sydney, Sydney, Australia. Covering customs, resources, travel, hunting, sports, politics, history. (*Postage 5 cents.*)

FIREARMS, PAST AND PRESENT

Rifles, shotguns, pistols, revolvers and ammunition. (Any questions on the arms adapted to a particular locality should *not* be sent to this department but to the "Ask Adventure" editor covering the district in question.)

A.—All Shotguns (including foreign and American makes). J. B. THOMPSON, 906 Pontiac Bldg., Chicago, Ill.

B.—All Rifles, Pistols and Revolvers (including foreign and American makes). D. WIGGINS, Salem, Ore.

FISHING IN NORTH AMERICA

Salt and Fresh Water Fishing

J. B. THOMPSON, 906 Pontiac Bldg., Chicago, Ill. Covering fishing-tackle and equipment; fly and bait casting; live bait; camping outfits; fishing trips.

STANDING INFORMATION

For general information on U. S. and its possessions, write Sup't of Public Documents, Wash., D. C., for catalog of all Government publications.

For the Philippines and Porto Rico, the Bureau of Insular Affairs, War Dep't, Wash., D. C.

For Alaska, the Alaska Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, Central Bldg., Seattle, Wash.

For Hawaii, Hawaii Promotion Committee, Chamber of Commerce, Honolulu, T. H. Also, Dep't of the Interior, Wash., D. C.

For Cuba, Bureau of Information, Dep't of Agri., Com., and Labor, Havana, Cuba.

For Central and South America, John Barrett, Dir. Gen. Pan-American Union, Wash., D. C.

For R. N. W. M. P., Commissioner Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Ottawa, Can. Only unmarried British subjects, age 18 to 40, above 5 ft. 8 in. and under 175 lbs., accepted.

For Canal Zone, the Panama Canal Commission, Wash., D. C.

For U. S., its possessions and most foreign countries, the Dep't of Com., Wash., D. C.

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Mexico's Minerals and Woods

PLEASE note that this friend's specific questions are answered in full; but neither Mr. Whiteaker nor any other "Ask Adventure" editor can undertake to answer the unasked:

Question:—"I would be much obliged if you would send me a description of the minerals, lumbering, and the other articles of Mexico which come under your attention.

Enclosed find five cents in stamps which are required, also two cents, return postage."—HOWARD MCPHERSON, Grangeville, Idaho.

Answer, by Mr. Whiteaker:—It would take many pages to give you a description of all that you want to know about Old Mexico. I will therefore touch lightly upon the minerals.

In most of the northern States of Old Mexico there is to be found in large quantities gold, silver, iron, copper, lead, zinc, antimony, mercury, opals, aluminum, sulfur, bismuth, and many other minerals; but these are the most important.

The different varieties of wood in Mexico are about two hundred. Among the woods used for construction purposes are yellow and white oak, ironwood, guncastle, grandadillo, mezquitillo, ocote, ceiba, almandrill, algarrobo. Cabinet woods are mahogany, caobilla, three varieties of cedar, two reds and one white; ebony, three varieties, one of them called the green ebony; gateado, and rosewood. Several million dollars a year made from the forests.

I don't know what other articles you mean in your letter so I will not try to answer your others without some object in view. I might wander around all night long and not arrive at the questions you want answered.

Don't hesitate to send in a list of questions about anything you want to know covered by this department. All you need do is to send stamp for answer. You are not required to send five cents unless you are in a foreign country.

The Sargasso Sea

WELCOME to an old friend, concerning which, or whom, we gather some facts that may be new to most of us. At any rate there are possibilities for some weird speculation suggested by the questions Mr. Marshall asks:

Question:—"I am approaching you with some questions relating to the Sargasso Sea, as any information given in the Encyclopedia Britannica does not state whether this sea has ever been explored.

Has the Sargasso Sea ever been explored, or has any person ever passed through the center of it?

If it has not been explored is it not possible that, considering that the driftage of thousands of years has accumulated there, sufficient deposits have been made to build up land?

If land does exist, would it not probably be of a swampy nature?

And if there is any possibility of prehistoric animals existing at the present day, would not the conditions here be more suitable than in any other known place?"—R. F. MARSHALL, Northam, W. A., Australia.

Answer, by Mr. Brown:—There has been a large amount of fiction and but a limited amount of fact published about the Sargasso Sea. Vessels have frequently passed through the sea, commencing with those of Columbus on his first voyage. I do not know whether there has ever been a thorough and systematic exploration of the whole sea, but doubt whether there is any portion of it which has not been traversed at some time by vessels.

According to all that I have read from authoritative sources, the mass of the vegetation which covers the sea consists largely of a seaweed peculiar to the sea itself and which is not attached to the bottom, but which reproduces itself afloat on the surface. None of the writers who have passed through the sea speak of any large accumulation of driftwood from offshore as a distinctive phenomenon of the sea.

There is hardly a possibilty of any islands forming there from the sinking of waterlogged offshore driftwood, because soundings show a great depth of water in all parts of the sea, a fact which is taken as conclusive proof that the vegetation reproduces itself on the surface.

A rather interesting account of a passage through the Sargasso Sea, with notes on the vegetation, I ran across in an old number of the *Eclectic* magazine, dated in 1870, I believe, and copied from some English magazine, the name of which I do not recall. The auther was Cuthbert Collingwood. Perhaps you could get track of this in some public library.

Put at least five cents postage on all letters addressed to Ask Adventure editors who live outside the U. S. Always enclose at least five cents in International Reply Coupons for answer.

Rolling a Gun

AGAIN we have a detailed description of one of the most famous as well as most deadly fighting tricks of the old Western gunmen:

Question:—"One sometimes reads in stories and magazine articles of a man rolling his gun. I have never been able to get a clear answer or explanation on the subject. The nearest approach to it was given to me the other day by a bank messenger, who suggested that it was no more than whirling a revolver or pistol around on one's finger, something like the reputed tactics of the famous Billy the Kid, when that outlaw was held up by any one.

Can you throw any light on the subject? Is there any such a stunt as 'rolling the gun' or is it merely some poetical description used by the novelists?"—RICHARD P. FURGESON, Alliance, O.

Answer, by Mr. Wiggins:—Your friend was right as to "rolling a gun." The weapon was hung on the forefinger and whirled rapidly; the trigger was

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pulled as the weapon slid into the hand, and good work at close range could be done in this manner. It was a gunfighter's trick, and deadly. In the old single-action Colt the hammer was caught by the thumb of the gun hand as the gun swung to position, and the continued revolution of the gun cocked it; the weight on the trigger of the gun fired it. Most of the adepts finally get shot themselves.

Tackle for Michigan Waters

PLENTY of good fish in the Wolverene State if you know where to go for it and are properly equipped—outfitted for example with the tackle that Mr. Thompson herewith recommends:

Question:—"I wish full information as to fishing-tackle and equipment required for a two weeks' fishing trip into Michigan.

Would also like to get information on live bait, also on fly and bait casting for bass, perch, pickerel and blue gill.

Which would you recommend for the above-named fish?

Would be very much obliged to you if you would furnish the name and address of companies from whom I may obtain such articles as you may recommend as equipment for an amateur fisherman."—J. T. DAWSON, McKeesport, Penn.

Answer, by Mr. Thompson:—For a two weeks' trip in Michigan I would get a small tent, like the George tent; two blankets, a suit of overalls, old shoes, waders and a one-man camp-cook outfit such as is furnished our army officers. Also one light raincoat, like the Perfection.

You can get live bait at your fishing-grounds, especially if you have one of the glass minnow-traps, but with them you will not be successful unless the entrance is down-stream. Remember this. If you do not care to catch frogs, dig worms; you can get them at most of the big sporting-goods stores The Anglers' Supply Co. of Chicago will ship them anywhere.

For fly-casting for bass, perch, pickerel and blue gills, I would advise a 4¼-oz., 9-ft. split bamboo rod, enameled silk line, and good 6-foot leaders. This will make a nice fly-rod for trout as you will find them in many places, both rainbows, brown and brook.

As for flies for bass and larger fish use those tied on No. 1 hooks. Professor, Lord Baltimore, Colonel Fuller, Coachman, Grizzly King, Queen of the Waters and the floating bugs are very good. For blue gills and perch use trout-flies on 14 hooks; any gaudy pattern will do; and it ; advisable to sink them by affixing to the lead.r a shot or two No. 8 size.

In a bait-casting rod my preference is for a 5¼-foot. Use any of the wooden minnows or plugs on the market, or the spoons and spinners.

As you ask for this outfit or rather the firm that can supply you, I refer you to Mr. Ivar Hennings, South Bend Bait Co., South Bend, Ind., or the Shakespeare Co., Kalamazoo, Mich. Get a good antiback ash reel, and the best braided silk line you can buy, and take care of it by drying it every time you are not using it.

If there is any further information I can offer, will gladly do so.

Uganda

BIG game and big sickness country—that's Uganda.

Question:—"Having read in the *Adventure* magazine that you were an authority on certain portions of Africa that I am interested in, I am taking the liberty of writing you in reference to Uganda and the upper Congo.

What is the climate like? And I would also like to get a general idea of the living conditions as well as some knowledge of the natives.

Do you think that a mining engineer could make good out there; and could he live decently?

What kinds of large game are there? I suppose that one should have a liberal supply of ready money before attempting the trip at all; shouldn't he?"—HUBERT D. COLEMAN, Westwood, Calif.

Answer, by Mr. Beadle:—I will take your questions seriatim:

The climate of Uganda is wet, hot and generally bad. Has more diseases to the square mile than any other part of Africa almost—sleeping sickness, spirilum, malaria, chiggers, blackwater, etc.

Southern and swampy forest, small hills and swamp and to north interminable swamps of the Nile.

Upper Congo is quite different; mostly highlands, being the water-shed of the Congo River; climate not very warm and cool at night for the most part. In the fingers as it were of the Ituri Forest, which in some parts reaches the Ruwenzori Mountains, it is again hot and wet. Generally speaking it is much healthier than Uganda.

Living conditions in Entebbe, the capital of Uganda: There are hotels and most modern conveniences. A white travels and lives well there in order to preserve his health at all. Food plentiful; fruit, eggs, fowls, goats, cattle, vegetables. In the Upper Congo, as it is farther removed from the railway or waterway, living is a bit harder; also as the country is not so prolific in fruits, etc.

Natives: Naturally I can hardly tackle such a big subject in a letter, but I enclose you a list of books, the three marked of which will give you the information desired.

A mining engineer couldn't likely make good there unless he had a job to go to as practically all appointments are made in Europe.

Game: It is the greatest perhaps, next to British East Africa, game country in the world; elephants, rhino, hippo, zebra, lion, leopard, wild-cat, wild boar, large and small buck—too numerous to name. But it is all preserved and licenses are necessary to shoot anything except lion, leopard, etc.

Yes, one should have sufficient funds before attempting the trip. For fares, etc., write to Thomas Cook & Son, 245 Broadway, New York.

World's Greatest Platinum Country

IT ISN'T Russia any more:

Question:—"Want some information from you as to a trip I am planning to make within the next six months. Am building a 40-foot sloop, Diesel engine auxiliary, and with my old second mate for my partner am going down the coast for what I can

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find. I want to try some placer mining, and want all the information you can give me as to the best place to sail for.

I don't expect to carry anything in way of trade, only taking in what grub we can stow for future needs, and ballast, and I want to make for some port where I can leave my boat in safety and take into the country with a fair prospect of finding gold.

We are both master mariners, and as to the voyage you needn't bother to advise, and we are not strangers altogether to jungle-probing as we have done a lot of hunting; but neither of us knows a thing of gold-hunting in any form. But I do know there is plenty of it to be found in some of the Central American States, and I expect you can tell me the best chance to take.

Pelham Bay and the U. S. S. B. schools have made the sea so it ain't so derned pleasant nowadays and I am going to quit and stay quit.

I bought a place here in the country and intended to try chickens, etc., mostly etc., but she won't work. I planted 600 trees and the cuss-fired gophers have unplanted about 590 of them now. I refuse to be a walking delegate for the gophers' union any more, and I am going to sell my place to some good honest chief engineer who I have been on the outs with for ten or fifteen years, with no chance to get even, and try to make a few honest dollars.

This is not an expedition for adventure, as I have had my share of that in 21 years at sea out of my 34 of life; but it is a downright business proposition with us—to put in all we have, and gamble it against our chance of making good. We won't lose our best poker smile if we happen to lose, and we won't make any Scotty of Death Valley spectacles if we happen to hit.

If you print any of this kindly leave out names and places as I don't want any public fame."

Answer, by Mr. Young:—Instead of suggesting Nicaragua I am going to suggest an old stand-by—Colombia. She's thar. Ain't no doubt of it, for they are shipping it out in chunks and gobs every month. They are also producing more platinum than any other country in the world. Also supplying the world with emeralds. *¿Pues, hombre, que mas quiere usted?*

They've struck oil in a half-dozen places, iron, coal and a dozen other minerals. It's just a case of going there and looking around near where some one else has struck it and then filing on it or placering it out.

The worst feature of prospecting in Colombia is the malarial fever, which has got many a poor bird who went in to make his pile. The best placering region lies on the Pacific side in what is known as the Choco Department, which lies east of the Western Cordillera and contains the rich gold-bearing coast range of small mountains.

The San Juan and the headwaters of the Atrato are lousy with gold and platinum, and the Indians and local prospectors are sending out a lot of it. The San Juan alone is producing a million a year in platinum (declared at custom house).

The dope would be to leave your craft at Buena Ventura, take the railroad up to Cali and outfit and strike in from there, after looking over the local situation. You can go back a few days and never see a soul but savages. And they have some bad Indians in this part who have been known to kill white men, including a party of English botanists.

The idea is to find good prospecting-ground, according to the article I am attaching, rip out boards with a saw you have had with you (two-man native ripsaw), make sluice-box and sluice it out.

Sorry I haven't time to go into further details just at present. Dr. G. H. Tarr, an ex-lieut., is up in there now with four men. He said he was going in to find it and headed for the Colombia-Ecuador boundary and vicinity.

LOST TRAILS

NOTE—We offer this department of the "Camp-Fire" free of charge to those of our readers who wish to get in touch again with old friends or acquaintances from whom the years have separated them. For the benefit of the friend you seek, *give your own name if possible*. All inquiries along this line, unless containing contrary instructions, will be considered as intended for publication in full with inquirer's name, in this department, at our discretion. We reserve the right in case inquirer refuses his name, to substitute any numbers or other names, to reject any item that seems to us unsuitable, and to use our discretion in all matters pertaining to this department. Give also your own full address. We will, however, forward mail through this office, assuming no responsibility therefor. We have arranged with the Montreal *Star* to give additional publication in their "Missing Relative Column," weekly and daily editions, to any of our inquiries for persons last heard of in Canada. Except in case of relatives, inquiries from one sex to the other are barred.

HALL, FLORENCE. Maiden name Florence Nutbrown, or Baxter. Left Sheffield, England, twenty-seven years ago. Last heard of sixteen years ago in Canada. Please write to sister Lily.—Address MRS. HALLAM, The Poplars, Learmouth, Nr. Ballarat, Victoria, Australia.

GIBBS, First name not known. Last seen in 2nd C. M. R. at Victoria, B. C., in 1914. Went to Klondike last of that year. Write to your old Buddy. A. C. HAIGHT, Instructors Bks. 15th Reg. Aviation Camp, Great Lakes, Ill.

MYERS, JAMES G. Last heard of in China. Do not go to Panama as I left the C. Z. March tenth. Would like to see you. Am at Olivier, La.—"FRENCHY."

McDERMOTT, MRS. CHRYSTAL. Maiden name Chrystal Darnell, sometimes called Mabel. Age twenty-four, about five feet, five inches tall, dark hair and complexion, blue eyes. When last heard from was a waitress in Salt Lake City, Utah in 1917. Any information will be appreciated by her mother and brother.—Address C. E. MOORE, Box 45, Ravenna, Nebr.

VOLKMAN, CHARLES G. Served with me in Marine Guard U. S. S. *Nebraska*, 1913-1915. Also sentry at Naval prison, Portsmouth, N. H. Home in Baltimore, Md. Get in touch with me, Abe, I have something to your advantage.—Address RALPH K. WILSON, 4455 Lake Ave., Rochester, N. Y.

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ZAVISINK, FRANK. Alias Mandes A. Slovenian. Husband. Age thirty-eight, weighs 200 pounds, dark complexion, brown hair and eyes; slightly bald. Has a small mustache and a scar on his chin. Was a liquor salesman. Disappeared from Pittsburgh March 25, 1918. Write to your family or come home, for the sake of your children. We need help. MRS. MARY ZAVISINK, P. O. Box 1325, Joliet, Ill.

RAYMOND and EDDIE. Grandma K. from Staten Island died in September. Mother is heartbroken. Write to your mother or to me.—AUNT GRACE.

DEHAVEN, WM. STRINGER. Last heard from at Eugene, Oregon, January 26, 1920. He is twenty-nine years old, five feet, six and one-half inches tall, weighs 150 pounds, light brown hair, light gray eyes. Was at Camp Dodge in 1918 and on the Mexican border in 1916. Please write Mother.—MRS. STELLA S. SMITH, Smoky Butte, Mont.

DOES any one of the old 15th Sep. Battalion of the 5th Reg. U. S. Marines, at that time doing M. P. duty in Brest, France, remember a certain scrap between two M. P.'s and five negroes from a civilian crew then on board the U. S. S. *Powhatan*, that took place in front of "The Select Bar," in Brest about October 1, 1919? If so, please communicate with THOMAS B. ROGERS, 1112 Main Street, Buffalo, New York.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

VINCENT, DONALD. Left home in Montreal, Canada, August 4, 1916. Would be now nineteen years of age, brown hair, blue eyes, left leg lame. Mother very anxious to hear from him.—Address H. VINCENT, 53 St. Zoteque St., Montreal, Canada.

LYON, C. W. JR. or GLADWYN LYON. Or may be under an assumed name. Twenty-one years of age, five feet ten inches, dark hair and eyes. Last seen in Newport News, Va., January, 1918. He is fond of boating and may be employed by some steamship or boatline at Norfolk, Va., or some other port. Any information will be gladly received by his mother.—Address MRS. HELEN STEDMAN LYON, Elizabethtown, N. C.

KEENEY, GEORGE A. Alias Ryviers. A cook by trade. Scar over left eye, tongue split. Fifty-four years of age. Last heard of in Seattle, Wash. Please write to your sister.—Address MRS. E. L. SELLERS, 201 London Ave., R. R. 7, Peoria, Ill.

SCHWARTZ, BARNEY. Twenty-seven years, five feet seven inches tall. 165 pounds, blond hair, blue eyes, nose twisted to one side. Occupation a peddler. Left wife and child in Bridgeport. Any one knowing his whereabouts please write.—WILLIAM E. BURTON, Washington and Madison Avenues, Bridgeport, Conn.

FRIENDS of CAPTAIN GEORGE ASH please communicate with him care of King, King & Co., Bankers, Bombay, India.

THE following have been inquired for in full in either the First October or Mid-October Issues of Adventure. They can get the name of the inquirer from this magazine:

ALLEN, JEROME; Ballard, Dave; Bass, Edgar Lee; Bastian, Walter; Bentley, Milton Reynolds; Bushnell, Lucian Hamilton; Callahan, Morris, alias Morris Kessler; Christianson, Chris; Clegg, Arthur; Cleveland, George C.; Coutant, Fred I.; D'Arcy, Mike; Darlington, James B.; De Lisle, Frank A.; Eastman, Edward J.; Estvan, Joseph; Foley, C. W.; Forsyth, Thomas; Hayes, Frank F.; Hill, Ernie C.; Howard, Charlie; Japenga, Jacob Orie; Kierstead, James Amos; Latimer, Rev.; Lilly, W. A.; Linn, Cyrus H.; McCoy, George; Nelson, Olla; Peppard, Gerald A.; Porter, Mel; Prine, Mort; Robel, James F.; Sheets, Robert; Smoky Pete; Sterling, William; Stiegler, Bernhardt; Stone, Nallie Russell; Tainton, Blair A.; Vinson, Edward; Watkins, Morril; Whittemore, Arthur R.; Young, Jack.

MISCELLANEOUS: Members of Promethean Pub. Co.; Members of Co. L 32nd U. S. Inf. and Sgts. Wyant, Bohana, Culver, Lt. Boyle.

MANUSCRIPTS UNCLAIMED

HASTLAR GAL BREATH; Ruth Gilfillan; Jack P. Robinson; Roy Ozmer; Miss Jimmie Banks; Lieut. Wm. S. Hilles; G. H. Atkins; G. E. Hungerford; A. Gaylord; E. J. Moran; F. S. Emerson; E. Murphy; H. E. Copp; James Mosse; C. E. Wilson; R. W. Kimsey; L. E. Patten; T. T. Bennett; J. E. Warner; Sinn Cardie.

UNCLAIMED mail is held by Adventure for the following persons, who may obtain it by sending us present address and proof of identity:

BEATON, SGT. MAJOR G. M.; Benson, Edwin Worth; Bertsch, Elizabeth; Bonner, Major J. S.; Mrs. Brownell; Carpenter, Capt. Robert S.; "Chink"; Coles, Bobby; Cook, Elliot D.; Cook, William N.; Cosby, Arthur F.; Crashley, Wm. T.; Eager, Paul Roman; Erwin, Phil; Fairfax, Boyd; Fisher, Edward E.; Fisher, Sgt. R.; Garson, Ed.; Gordon, W. A.; Green, Billy; Green, W.; Hale, Robert E.; Harris, Walter J.; Hart, Jack; Harwood, J.; Hoffman, J. M.; Hughes, Frank E.; Hunt, Daniel O'Connell; Jackson, Robert R.; Kohlhammer, Jack; Kuckaby, William Francis; Kuhn, Edward; Kutcher, Sgt. Harry; Lafler, Mrs. Harry; Lancaster, C. E.; Larisey, Jack; Lauder, Harry; Lee, Dr. C.; Lee, Capt. Harry, A. R. C.; Lee, Dr. William R.; Lewis, Warburton; "Lonely Jock"; Lovett, Harold S.; McAdams, W. B.; MacDonald, Tony; Madsen, Sgt. E. E.; Martel, Leon H.; Nelson, Frank Lovell; O'Hara, Jack; Parker, G. A.; Parker, Dr. M.; Parrott, Pvt. D. C.; Phipps, Corbett, C.; Phillips, Buffington; Pigeon, A. H.; Rich, Wagoner Bob; Rinkenback, Frank; Rundle, Merrill G.; Schmidt, G.; Scott, Pvt. James F.; Swan, George L.; Tripp, Edward N.; Van Tyler, Chester; Von Gelucke, Byron; Ward, Frank B.; Wheeler S. H.; Williams, W. P.; J. C. H.; L. T. 348; S. 177284; 439; WS-XV.

PLEASE send us your present address. Letters forwarded to you at address given us do not reach you.—Address L. B. BARRETTO, care of *Adventure*.

THE TRAIL AHEAD

MID-NOVEMBER ISSUE

In addition to the two long stories mentioned on the second contents page, the next *Adventure* will contain seven short stories and the conclusion of the serial now running.

TOYAMA Conclusion — *By Patrick Casey*
A mystery of the Mexican desert.

PROMOTING POLECAT PERKINS — *By W. C. Tuttle*
Polecat prospects for a fortune in the East.

HIS WORD OF HONOR — *By E. S. Pladwell*
An old-fashioned hold-up with modern methods.

THE FLEETS OF FORAY — *By Samuel Alexander White*
For the wealth of the wild North—fur.

TWO OF A KIND — *By L. Patrick Greene*
The *Major* again—and two Illicit Diamond Buyers in South Africa.

A COAT OF MAHOGANY — *By Roy P. Churchill*
"*Stormy*" starts something on his shore leave.

A GULP OF WATER* — *By Lynn Montross*
Heroism in the South Seas. *An Off-the-Trail story.

SETH BULLOCK, SHERIFF OF THE BLACK HILLS COUNTRY — *By Kermit Roosevelt*
A link with the past.

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Millions of People Can Write Stories and Photoplays and Don't Know It!

THIS is the startling assertion recently made by E. B. Davison of New York, one of the highest paid writers in the world. Is his astonishing statement true? Can it be possible there are countless thousands of people yearning to write, who really *can* and simply *haven't found it out?* Well, come to think of it, most anybody can *tell* a story. Why can't most anybody *write* a story? Why is writing supposed to be a rare gift that few possess? Isn't this only another of the Mistaken Ideas the past has handed down to us? Yesterday nobody dreamed man could fly. To-day he dives like a swallow ten thousand feet above the earth and laughs down at the tiny mortal atoms of his fellow-men below! So Yesterday's "impossibility" is a reality to-day.

"The time will come," writes the same authority, "when millions of people will be writers—there will be countless thousands of playwrights, novelists, scenario, magazine and newspaper writers—they are coming, coming—a whole new world of them!" And do you know what these writers-to-be are doing now? Why, they are the men—armies of them—young and old, now doing mere clerical work, in offices, keeping books, selling merchandise, or even driving trucks, running elevators, street cars, waiting on tables, working at barber chairs, following the plow, or teaching schools in the rural districts; and women, young and old, by scores, now pounding typewriters, or standing behind counters, or running spindles in factories, bending over sewing machines, or doing housework. Yes—you may laugh—but these are The Writers of To-morrow.

For writing isn't only for geniuses as most people think. *Don't you believe the Creator gave you a story-writing faculty just as he did the greatest writer?* Only maybe you are simply "bluffed" by the thought that you "haven't the gift." Many people are simply afraid to try. Or if they do try and their first efforts don't satisfy, they simply give up in despair, and that ends it. They're through. They never try again. Yet if, by some lucky chance, they had first learned the simple rules of writing, and then given the imagination free rein, they might have astonished the world!

But two things are essential in order to become a writer. First, to learn the ordinary principles of writing. Second, to learn to exercise your faculty of Thinking. By exercising a thing you develop it. Your Imagination is something like your right arm. The more you use it the stronger it gets. The principles of writing are no more complex than the principles of spelling, arithmetic, or any other simple thing that anybody knows. Writers learn to piece together a story as easily as a child sets up a miniature house with his toy blocks. It is amazingly easy after the mind grasps the simple "know how." A little study, a little patience, a little confidence, and the thing that looks hard turns out to be just as easy as it seemed difficult.

Thousands of people imagine they need a fine education in order to write. Nothing is farther from the truth. The greatest writers were the poorest scholars. People rarely learn to write at schools. They may get the principles there, but they *really learn to write* from the great, wide, open, boundless Book of Humanity! Yes, seething all around you, every day, every hour, every minute, in the whirling vortex—the flotsam and jetsam of Life—even in your own home, at work or play, are endless incidents for stories and plays—a wealth of material, a world of things happening. Every one of these has the seed of a story or play in it. Think! If you went to a fire, or saw an accident, you could come home and tell the folks all about it. Unconsciously you would describe it all very realistically. And if somebody stood by and wrote down exactly what you said, you'd be amazed to find your story would sound just as interesting as many you've read in magazines or seen on the screen. Now, you will naturally say, "Well, if Writing is as simple as you say it is, why can't *I* learn to write?" *Who says you can't!*

May Allison, movie star known the world over, says:

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This amazing book, called *"The Wonder Book for Writers,"* shows how easily stories and plays are conceived, written, perfected, sold. How many who don't *dream* they can write, suddenly find it out. How the Scenario Kings and the Story Queens live and work. How bright men and women, without any special experience, learn to their own amazement that their simplest ideas may furnish brilliant plots for Plays and Stories. How one's own Imagination may provide an endless gold-mine of ideas that bring Happy Success and Handsome Cash Royalties. How new writers get their names into print. How to tell if you *are* a writer. How to develop your "story fancy," weave clever word-pictures and unique, thrilling, realistic plots. How your friends may be your worst judges. How to avoid discouragement and the pitfalls of Failure. How to *win!*

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